

The
MIRROR
of
LAUGHTER

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ALEXANDER KOZINTSEV

Translated by Richard P. Martin



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Preface

“Il n’y a de nouveau que ce qui est oublié” – “There is nothing new except what has been forgotten,” Marie-Antoinette’s modiste Rose Bertin is said to have remarked when the queen approved an old dress Rose had refashioned for her. This sounds so much more reassuring than Ecclesiastes’ dismal maxim! In the twenty-first century, no scholar in his/her right mind would seriously assert that s/he has come up with a brand-new and overarching theory of humor and laughter. If the ideas I advance appear too novel or even radical to certain readers, this would only mean we have forgotten too much of what our predecessors have done. I want this book to be a tribute to figures who seem infinitely far from the mainstream of humor research – James Sully first of all, Sergei Eisenstein, Luigi Pirandello, and a number of others.

The German pre-Romantic writer and humor theorist Jean Paul compared wit to a disguised priest who weds every couple. Now that the time has come for a synthesis, perhaps the most fascinating challenge in humor research is to cross disciplinary boundaries and link the various approaches that have been suggested – especially those that had appeared so unsuited to each other, but that eventually proved incomplete without each other. It came as a revelation to me that the best way of getting a clue to the connection between humor and laughter (one of the most mysterious connections in human mentality and behavior, and a forbidden ground for modern theorists after so many failures) is to couple the radically subjectivist ideas of thinkers such as Kant and Jean Paul with the utterly objective views of twenty-first-century ethology and neural science.

The most remarkable thing about such discoveries is that however divergent – incompatible, in fact – the views may appear, they are all useful in one way or other through a synthetic approach. I would go so far as to say that not a single theory of humor ever formulated is “wrong from beginning to end,” like Alice’s version of the poem she recited for the Caterpillar. Even the ever-fashionable creators of mainstream

humor research such as Hobbes, Bergson, and Freud must be credited with having made very astute observations. The challenge is to detect these gems in a coal pile, pluck them from their original context, where they are misleading, and view them in a new light. The number of references may appear somewhat disproportionate to the modest size of the book, but this may reduce the number of critics who will reproach me for suggesting insane ideas, trying to reinvent the wheel, or both. Anyway, if the entire construction eventually collapses (which can by no means be ruled out), its foundation – the bibliography – will remain intact. Whether by Robert Southey or by Lewis Carroll, the poem is still about Father William.

Quite a few of my colleagues and friends found the manuscript a tough proposition. Following their advice, which I gratefully acknowledge, I have tried my best to make the text more readable. And still this is not a page-turner for all. To those who will slam the book shut before getting to the end, I wish to say that the larger share of the blame is mine, of course, whereas the smaller share lies in the fact that those seemingly flippant matters are strong meat, not milk. They defy common sense and prompt us humans to look at our deeply contradictory biocultural essence with closer attention. I wholeheartedly ask the impatient readers not to rush to the Conclusions (to my conclusions, not only to theirs), because in isolation from the main body of the book these may appear paradoxical, which would again make the reader reluctant to struggle through the entire text. By way of enticement, it might perhaps have been wiser to intersperse the book with jokes, but I consider this a variant of bait-and-switch tactics. After all, so many books about jokes – entire joke books, in fact – have been published, and still humor and laughter remain a mystery.

The first chapter focuses on the philosophy, psychology, and what has been traditionally regarded as the semantics of humor but eventually proved a will-o'-the-wisp. In the second chapter, biological facts about laughter are discussed, and a hypothesis about the origins of laughter and humor is formulated, or rather James Sully's hypothesis is reformulated in the context of modern knowledge. The third chapter addresses play, serious and nonserious – in particular, linguistic play – as well as the semantic, or rather anti-semantic, function of humor (special attention is paid to the distinction between humor and irony and to the struggle of language with itself). The theme of the fourth chapter is the conflict between culture and nature, specifically, the attempts to combine laughter with violence.

As in the Russian version, “he” is used as an unmarked (generic) pronoun when referring to man as *Homo sapiens* or to the philosophical subject or object. When individuals (persons, speakers, and psychological subjects) are concerned, gender-marked forms such as “s/he” and “his/her” are used. Should the reader find that I am less than consistent in the usage of these pronouns, I will ask her to forgive me.

After the first draft of my hypothesis had appeared (Kozintsev, 2002c) and then after the publication of my book in Russia (Kozintsev, 2007a), I received many letters from people whom I did not know personally. Some of them eventually became my friends and, which is no less pleasant, made friends with each other. Others carried on fierce arguments with me. Among those who wrote to me were psychologists, philologists, linguists, philosophers, anthropologists, ethologists, two priests, and a clown. My thanks are equally due to all of them (the list of names would be too long).

Among those who have contributed to the appearance of this greatly enlarged English version, I am especially grateful to Richard and Ariadna Martin. It was a pleasant surprise to me that Richard had volunteered to translate the book before we got to know each other (now we are good friends). He has spent tremendous time and effort to struggle with the vagaries of my style, and he has always been patient with my nasty habit of introducing changes after the final – really, really final – version has been agreed upon. Richard’s comments and suggestions were invariably useful. I also wish to thank Jessica Milner-Davis, who has greatly encouraged and helped me in this enterprise. I am deeply obliged to Irving Horowitz, who has accepted my manuscript for publication, to Laurence Mintz, who has improved it by editing, and to all the staff of Transaction Publishers.

I hope that this book will enlarge the circle of my correspondents. Any comments, including the most merciless criticism (I do not doubt that there will be more than enough given the unaccustomed nature of my conclusions) will be accepted with gratitude. My postal address is Museum of Anthropology and Ethnography, Universitetskaia nab., 3, Saint Petersburg, 199034, Russia. My e-mail address is agkozintsev@gmail.com, and this is the address I prefer.

1

The Comic, or Imitation of Inferior People

1.1 Incongruity, Degradation, and Self-Parody: The Implicit Narrator

Let us begin with the classic definition of the comic, found in Aristotle's *Poetics* (II, 1448a, 16-18; V, 1449a, 32-36). Many theorists still consider it almost ideal. Aristotle distinguishes between tragedy and comedy thus: the former represents people as better than they are today, while the latter, as worse. "Comedy," he continues, "is a representation of inferior people,¹ not indeed in the full sense of the word bad, but the laughable is a species of the base or ugly. It consists in some blunder or ugliness that does not cause pain or disaster, an obvious example being the comic mask which is ugly and distorted but not painful."²

Aristotle is very prudent. The first thing he does is to puzzle the reader. Indeed, idealizing people as in tragedy seems natural, but why represent them as worse than they are in fact? However, we hardly have time to ponder this question before an easy way out is offered to us as a reservation about the utter inoffensiveness of what is represented. A comic mask – big deal! Neither pain nor disaster. Up to the present day, numerous aestheticians have held on to, like a lifebuoy, the idea of inoffensiveness of the themes referred to by comedy, as if taking no notice of a whole sea of facts contradicting it.

So who exactly "imitates inferior people" and why? Is it only the comic artist – one whose face is covered up by a ridiculous mask or distorted by a grimace? Yes, we usually think so and believe that the best purpose for such an imitation is to depict for us spectators evil or imperfection in all its wretchedness so as to "destroy" it with laughter and to experience triumph in our victory. This was the usual viewpoint of Soviet theorists, who considered laughter a "weapon of satire."

2 The Mirror of Laughter

In the seventeenth century, Thomas Hobbes, the author of the superiority theory, voiced a rather similar opinion. However, according to Hobbes, “grimaces called laughter” express not the triumph of a socially beneficial victory over evil and imperfection, but our egotistic and vain “sudden glory” stemming from the fact that we consider ourselves nobler, smarter, and more beautiful than the object (Hobbes, 1957/1651, p. 36). The optimism, as we see, is the same, and the difference is only in the function of the derision. In the first case it is put at the service of society; in the second, it is realized in self-serving aims.

An extreme version of the superiority theory was recently proposed by Marina Riumina, who asserts that the comic is “a situation where evil happens to someone else,” with the “observer-subject occupying, as it were, the place of God” and egotistically rejoicing in his own safety. “The tragic and the comic coincide in almost every respect (the nature of the situation and man’s position in it), and differ only in the choice of viewpoint” (Riumina, 2003, p. 115). But if so, then why should they just “coincide”? They could as well switch places. The American comedian Mel Brooks was more consistent: “Tragedy is when I cut my finger. Comedy is when you walk into an open sewer and die.” In the West, the Hobbesian concepts of the comic, often in the form of the “schadenfreude theory,” are quite popular (McGhee, 1979, p. 22; Morreall, 1983, pp. 4-10; Sanders, 1995, p. 38; Gruner, 1997; Martin, 2007, pp. 43-55).

Superiority, schadenfreude, triumph over evil – is this the reason for our pleasure; is this why comedies are written? This view had already aroused doubt very long ago. To quote Friedrich Schlegel, “The simple man is not so sensitive to the repulsive, which the comic often contains: he can be amused by the comic features of a suffering or wicked creature... Pure pleasure seldom contains funniness, but funniness (very often none other but pleasure in the bad) is more active and vital.” (F. Schlegel, 1979/1794, p. 20). Schlegel called the “inherent pleasure in the bad” a “hereditary sin of comic energy.” The tint of class snobbery present in these dicta makes them even more valuable because in spite of his views Schlegel had to admit that as soon as Menander had tried to cleanse comedy from the “hereditary sin” and endow it with refinement and elegance and the characters with “humanity” (evidently considering the “imitation of inferior people” an unworthy occupation), the comic energy of Old Comedy vanished into thin air.

“Pleasure in the bad” – this is, after all, something directly contrary to pleasure in superiority, schadenfreude, and triumph over the bad. Who, then, imitates “inferior people” and why does s/he do that? Let us approach Aristotle for explanations. “A man will draw the line at some

jokes,” he wrote in a treatise addressed to his son or to his father (*Nicomachean Ethics*, IV, 14 [VIII]), “for raillery is a sort of vilification, and some forms of vilification are forbidden by law; perhaps some forms of raillery ought to be prohibited also.... The buffoon is one who cannot resist a joke; he will not keep his tongue off himself or anyone else, if he can raise a laugh...”³

Unlike the passages about the comic preserved in the *Poetics*, this excerpt hardly admits any variant readings. Aristotle makes it clear that it is not comic actors who imitate the “inferior people,” depicting them in caricatured form with the ostensible aim of ridiculing them, but the authors of comic texts and their listeners, and that this “aischrology” (foul language) inherited from Old Comedy is no occupation for a free-born man and is more suited to a “beast.” How different is the New Comedy with its elegance, sense of proportion and innuendos!

The simplest thing is to brush such opinions aside, claiming that Aristotle used the word “beasts” with reference to slaves and that therefore his words cannot apply to us. But even we, like Athenians of the fourth century BC laugh at jokes. As soon as we start reflecting on our laughter, we are left with a strange aftertaste as was Aristotle. “To what a difficult, ignoble and intrinsically vicious artistic genre jokes belong,” wrote Kornei Chukovsky in his diary (1995/1937, p. 154). “Since poetry, lyricism, and tenderness are excluded from them, they forcibly draw you into vulgar attitudes to people, things, and events – after which you feel diminished and far worse than you are in fact.”

A man who would risk voicing such an opinion nowadays would probably be deemed a crank. Leonid Karassev (1996, pp. 67-74) has good reason to say that the antithesis of laughter is shame. People who avoid being considered cranks prefer to be ashamed of shame itself. “It is shameful not to be shameless,” wrote St. Augustine about them and about us as well (*Confessions*, II, 9).

Modern humor theorists⁴ who study jokes from the linguistic standpoint tend to ignore the ethical aspect altogether. Their evaluations of the quality of jokes are based nearly exclusively on cognitive and semantic aspects – “script oppositeness,” “logical mechanisms,” punchline, etc. The genre itself, however, is tacitly believed to be no better and no worse than any other. The idea that good jokes and bad jokes may, in some important sense, be equally “bad,” and that precisely this “badness” may account for their popularity, sounds either hopelessly naïve or Freudian.

The authors of modern linguistic theories of verbal humor, which are in line with the incongruity theory (Raskin, 1985; Attardo, 1994,

2001b; Ritchie, 2004), see the main incongruity, believed to underlie funniness, in the semantics of the comic text, i.e., in its relation to the real or possible world. This relation is contradictory, being based on the coexistence of two alternative meanings of the text. By perceiving the text as funny the subject allegedly reacts to this incongruity. In other words, the comic incongruity is believed to be objective, that is, inherent in the text or in its referent. This view is shared by nearly all theorists – not only those who hold the incongruity theory, but also proponents of most other theories.⁵ Incongruity can come about in various ways. Either the text is realistic but ambiguous (Shultz, 1972) or fantasy and faulty logic are invoked (Suls, 1972; see Ritchie, 2004, pp. 55-7, for a discussion of these two models). In any event, the text has to be instantaneously reinterpreted by the perceiver, causing what the cognitive linguists call a “frame shift” (Coulson, 2001).

According to a belief held by members of the highly influential school founded by Victor Raskin, the necessary and sufficient conditions for a text to be funny are that (1) the text is compatible with two different scripts, and (2) these two scripts are opposite in a special sense, that is, they evoke binary categories that are essential to human life (Raskin, 1985, pp. 99, 113, 115; Attardo, 1994, pp. 203-5; Attardo, 2001b, pp. 17-20). Overlapping but non-opposed scripts are said to be found in ambiguous, metaphorical, and mythical texts, whereas opposed but non-overlapping scripts suggest conflict, possibly tragic (Attardo, 1994, p. 204). Also, the theory holds that jokes belong to the non-bona fide communication mode in that they violate Grice’s conversational maxims (Grice, 1989, pp.26-7): “In many if not most jokes, . . . ambiguity is deliberate and the intention of the speaker includes two interpretations which he wants the hearer to perceive” (Raskin, 1985, p. 115).⁶

Well, let’s see how it works. At the Last Supper, Jesus asserted that bread was his body, whereas wine was his blood. A frame shift indeed! The two scripts, mundane and mystical, show both oppositeness and at least partial overlap (a full overlap for believers taking Communion). No doubt, categories such as *real/unreal* and *profane/sacral* are highly essential to human life. Moreover, ambiguity was deliberate, and the speaker obviously wanted both interpretations, relating to the *accidentia* and to the *substantia*, respectively, to be perceived by the hearers either simultaneously or in succession (apparently, he hadn’t heard about Grice’s maxims). Did any of the confused disciples laugh? The gospels are silent on this matter. At least nowadays, words pronounced during the Eucharist are hardly perceived as a joke by many people, believers

or otherwise. Or again, scripts on which a crime story is based are both overlapping and opposed. The *innocent/guilty (good/bad)* opposition is highly essential to human life, ambiguity is deliberate, and both scripts are confused in the mind of the readers. In short, all the “sufficient” conditions are met, and yet hardly many of us find such stories funny. Even the “punchline” – the sentence which unexpectedly disambiguates the crime story and discloses the murderer – doesn’t make us laugh. On the other hand, the conditions are unnecessary as well since people can laugh at texts in which no script oppositeness can be detected by any stretch of the imagination (Morreall, 2004). Perhaps the main lesson to be drawn from the age-long history of attempts at formulating an essentialist definition of funniness is that these attempts are futile (see section 1.3).

Most psychologists and linguists believe that humorous incongruity is normally “resolved” in some way or other (Suls, 1972). Means of resolution are referred to as “justification” (Auboin, 1948, p. 95), “cognitive rule” (Suls, 1972), “appropriate inappropriateness” (Monro, 1951, pp. 241-2),⁷ “appropriate incongruity” (Oring, 1992, p. 81), “local logic” (Ziv, 1984, p. 90), “logical mechanism” (Attardo, 2001b, pp. 25-6), or “pseudo-plausibility” (Chafe, 2007, p. 9). All these notions, however, are applicable to nonhumorous texts as well. Thus, the local logic in the Evangelical example cited above is that all the absurdity of the claim notwithstanding, Christ’s body should be represented by a solid substance (bread), whereas blood should be represented by a liquid (wine, likely red). Logical mechanisms connecting the two overlapping and opposed scripts are a *sine qua non* of crime fiction.

Many jokes and cartoons, too, are based on this principle, although some of them (those belonging to the category of nonsense) do not admit resolution. A typical example of unresolved incongruity is the cartoon depicting a skier who, judging by the tracks, has managed to pass a tree with one ski on one of its sides and the other ski on the other.⁸ The artist is trying to foist absurdity on us. Remaining on the level of the cartoon, we conclude: if people were able to pass through hard objects, then everything would look like that, but... Hence the next conclusion: if this were serious, then we should reflect upon it, but...

Thus we move from the level of humorous stimulus to the metalevel⁹ and no longer think about *what* we are shown or told, but about *why* we are shown or told it. In semiotic terms our attention shifts from the semantics of the representation (semantics is absent here as there is no meaning to be found in the picture) to its pragmatics, that is, to its

context or author. We conclude that the artist is either not in his right mind or – which is more likely – is pulling our leg. Maybe he is mocking realistic art that seeks to copy life? Or maybe it is not reality that he represents, but an absurd picture drawn by someone else? This is what William Hogarth did in his *Satire on False Perspective*. The chances are that the cartoonist's aim is not to affirm the primacy of marvel over reality (a cartoon is hardly an appropriate means of achieving that end), but to amuse us. We are expected to laugh – and we do laugh if we are in the right mood. Or we don't if we are out of sorts.

But the problem is not only with nonsense. If the key element in the perception of humor is getting the point of a joke or a cartoon, then what's the difference between the pleasure derived from "incongruity resolution" and that derived from solving a puzzle, guessing a riddle, or discovering which character in a crime story is the murderer? We won't be able to understand this if we look at the humorous narrative from the level of its semantics – from the low level on which the author forcibly places us. "Logical mechanisms" functioning on this level are usually sham and illusory, and what seemed to be a resolution proves devoid of meaning (Rothbart and Pien, 1977). Take the wisecrack of a four-year-old boy who proved able to resolve an incongruity and to create an "appropriate inappropriateness" by means of a logical mechanism. Seeing a cartoon of dogs watching television, he said, "They're probably showing a dog food commercial" (Pien and Rothbart, 1976).

"Local logic" is irrefutable: if dogs were able to watch TV, the first thing to attract their attention would probably be a dog food commercial. The "resolution" here is incomplete, though. The incongruity has still not been removed – dogs do not watch TV. We have no choice but to shift to the metalevel and draw a conclusion no longer pertaining to the semantics of the utterance, but to its pragmatics. Had this been said in earnest, it should have been treated seriously, but... Having understood the speaker's intention and having agreed to be fooled, we laugh. If we don't agree, we don't laugh.

Partial resolution of incongruity, then, does not make us feel less duped than would the absence of any resolution. And even if the incongruity is minimal and is perfectly resolved so that the joke formally resembles a riddle or a crime story, the situation remains basically the same. Take an utterly realistic joke that for some reason has been extremely popular with contemporary humor scholars (Raskin, 1985, pp. 117-27). "Is the doctor at home?" the patient asked in his bronchial whisper. "No," the doctor's young and pretty wife whispered in reply, "Come right in!" At

the joke level everything is perfectly resolved: a whisper can indeed be a symptom of illness, but... The story turns out to have been ambiguous, and its two scripts show a nearly perfect overlap. Graeme Ritchie (2004, pp. 59-60) believes that in such cases of forced reinterpretation (aka backtracking) we should speak of surprise disambiguation not incongruity resolution. Indeed, the punchline comes as a surprise, activating the second script (or frame); the logical mechanism is faultless and furnishes a complete resolution, so no faulty logic is required. The only problem is that this brings us nowhere near to laughter. From the standpoint of semantics we are faced with what in another context could be considered an intriguing short story.

To laugh, it is necessary, though not sufficient, to shift to the metalevel and reach a conclusion concerning not the meaning of the story but the story itself: if it were serious, then it should be treated accordingly, but... We reach this conclusion not because “such things don’t happen” (as in nonsense). They do happen – why not? – but the issue here is not one of semantics, but of pragmatics. We recognize the age-old intention of the joke teller – to fob off on us a fake that does not meet our standards of common sense, decorum, taste, etc. However, to understand this, a sense of humor is not required. And now comes the critical moment. We need to take a wrong turn, to overcome internal resistance, in other words, not to judge the joke as we would in a serious mood (“Baloney!?”; “Is this the best one you can tell?” etc.), but to yield to temptation and accept what’s being thrust on us. In other words, we need to perceive the story from two points of view: from the metalevel (that is, from our own level) and from the low level of the story itself, or rather, of its author or narrator.

Thus the meaning of a joke and the meaning of humor are entirely different things. In fact, they may be opposed. Many if not most theories of humor confuse these things. It is in our own behavior, and not in the object, that the comic incongruity is rooted. Indeed, when we are serious, we avoid fakes and do not allow others to fool us. Writers of fantasy fiction do not fool us; they fascinate and shock us by force of imagination. In both instances we are serious and consistent. In the case of humor, by contrast, we show inconsistency. Despite recognizing the insignificance, triviality, vulgarity, in other words, the nonseriousness of the story, we accept what we would reject in a normal frame of mind. In fact, we accept it solely *because* we should reject it!

Søren Kierkegaard (1968/1846, part 2, chap. 4, sect. 2A, par. 2) very clearly explained where the main comic incongruity lies. “In ordinary

life a person laughs when something becomes laughable, and having had his laugh, he sometimes says, 'It's wrong to make this sort of thing the object of laughter.' However, if all this was really laughable, we can't help but pass the story along, naturally deleting at the same time the additional assertion accompanying laughter: 'It's wrong to make this sort of thing the object of laughter.' And no one notices how funny it is that *the real contradiction* (italics mine – A. K.) *lies in our feigned attempt to behave ethically by omitting an accompanying comment rather than by rejecting everything that precedes it.*"¹⁰

Such a contradiction does not arise in the perception of religious or fantastic texts, even though both are infinitely far from realism and require the "willing suspension of disbelief." Coleridge, who coined this expression, referred to "poetic faith," not to humor. The Bible, the works of El Greco or Kafka are full of meaning for us; to appreciate them, we need not regress; on the contrary, we must strive our hardest to progress to a level much higher than ours. We, ordinary hearers, spectators and readers, are too absorbed by the semantics of these texts to care for their pragmatics. Hyperreality draws us in without affording us the slightest chance of stepping aside and looking at it from the metalevel. Even a crime story draws us in!

Degraded reality or degraded fantasy (the difference is immaterial here) is another matter. Imagine watching a third-rate horror film or a televised session of a hypnotist whom we consider a quack. In both cases we may laugh at the moment we yield to illusion and immediately perceive our own stupidity and gullibility. This laughter may sound somewhat "nervous," but how are we to distinguish it from "humorous" laughter?

For cognitive semanticists and psychologists, jokes and cartoons with complete resolution, which appear closest of all to bona fide stories and drawings, pose more not fewer problems than their nonsensical counterparts because at the text level they appear quite realistic (as the story of the supposed patient). "Migrant plots" of such jokes find close parallels in *The Decameron*, *The Canterbury Tales*, *schwänke*, *fabliaux*, *facetiae*, Russian domestic folktales, or the *Tales of a Thousand and One Nights*, where stories of smart lovers, though entertaining, were not necessarily meant to arouse laughter. The same applies to medieval stories, found from England to China, about the "appropriately inappropriate" answers given by a tramp (subsequently a jester) to a ruler; such stories eventually turned into jokes (Meletinskii, 1986, p. 197; Otto, 2001, pp. 3-4, 113-5, 148-9, etc.). While the baffled ruler invariably laughs at the end,

it is by no means certain that his suspiciously naïve laughter evoked the same reaction among the listeners to these stories.

It is not plots that have changed since then, but tastes: whatever was appropriate in a folktale or in a medieval short story has degraded and has become inappropriate, stupid and vulgar in a contemporary urban joke. Herein rather than in any formal features like the punchline lies the principal distinction between the modern joke and the medieval short story or the folktale. Paradoxical as it sounds, telling jokes is always inappropriate. What appears to be “appropriate inappropriateness” on the semantic level (that of the joke itself) turns out to be “inappropriate appropriateness” on the pragmatic level, that is, on the metalevel. This is what Kierkegaard had in mind: even if the metatextual introduction censuring a joke (something like: “Listen what a piece of trash I heard recently!” or “Want to hear a stupid joke?”) is omitted, it is implied.

However happy such texts make us, the critical frame is always invisibly present; without it (rather, without its destruction) a joke falls flat. By telling jokes, we “imitate inferior people”; we parody their behavior. It is very doubtful that our aim is to condemn them. Rather it’s just the opposite. In Schlegel’s words, we “take pleasure in the bad,” fully realizing that the bad is exactly that. Without stretching the point, we can assert that any joke is parodic. Specifically, the “logical mechanism” is either an outright mockery of common sense, as in the child’s wisecrack about dogs watching TV, or, at best, a superficial analogy leading nowhere, as in confusing cold and sexual arousal as causes of voicelessness. One should by no means take these devices at face value. The joke always has a false bottom because apart from the author and the actual narrator, one more person contributes to it – “the implicit narrator,” one who is responsible for the inappropriateness.

The figure of the implicit narrator was first discussed by members of the Russian Formalist school, who developed a theory of stylized narrative (*skaz*) and can be considered precursors of modern narratology. In his article on Gogol’s *Overcoat*, Boris Eichenbaum (1995/1919, p. 272) wrote that “this *skaz* is not a narration, but instead a mimesis and a declamation; it is not a teller of tales who hides behind the printed text of ‘The Overcoat’ but, rather, a performer, almost a comic actor.” Viktor Shklovskii linked this figure to his theory of defamiliarization (*ostranenie*) (Shklovskii, 1990/1928, p. 361; Crawford, 1984). According to Shklovskii, the implicit narrator is a device the author uses to defamiliarize the theme. Similar ideas were elaborated in the same years by Viktor Vinogradov (1980/1925, pp. 51-3), who, in his theory

of *skaz*, mentioned the author's "linguistic mask" (or "stylistic mask"), which can be ugly and inappropriate for him. In this case, the mask is perceived as a signal of play and as a comic device. Sixty years later, the term "authorial mask" was introduced by Carl Malmgren (1985, pp. 160, 164) with regard to American postmodernist texts.

In his Dostoevskii book, first published in 1929, Mikhail Bakhtin (1984/1963, pp. 194-9) wrote that the mixture of two mutually alien discourses – that of the speaker and that of *another* – is common both in literature and in everyday communication. He termed this mixture "double-voiced discourse" (later, he introduced the term "heteroglossia"). Under Bakhtin's influence, his disciple Valentin Voloshinov (Vološinov 1986/1929, p. 134)¹¹ wrote about "objectified direct discourse,"¹² where the author's speech sounds like "another's speech," and the narrative proceeds exclusively within the character's narrow purview. Language in this type of discourse is not so much a means of reference to the object (character) as part of the object. In other words, the subject (author) tacitly delegates his narrative function to the object (implicit narrator) with the sole purpose of mimicking and ridiculing the narrator. The meaning of the latter's words is of secondary importance here, and the word "semantics" can be used with regard to this type of parodic discourse only in a very special sense. Thus, in Dostoevskii's *Nasty Story* the entire narrative is stylistically vulgar and must be attributed to the character, not to the author, even though nothing in the text, except its quality, directly suggests this. "Those words might be enclosed in quotation marks as 'another's speech'... But they belong not only to him. After all, the story is being told by a narrator.... By each of these banal epithets, the author, through the narrator, makes his hero ironic and ridiculous" (ibid., p. 136). Developing Eichenbaum's, Shklovskii's, Vinogradov's, and Bakhtin's ideas, Alexander Zholkovskii (1994) proposed the term "graphomania as a device."

According to modern narratology, the narrator, who is distinct from the author, is present in any literary work, no matter whether or not he is explicitly specified. "[T]he first point almost anyone in the field of narrative will agree nowadays with regard to narrators is that they should not be confused with the authors" (Abbott, 2002, p. 63). "Narrative never comes down to purely mimetic representation. A narrator is not absent when he is hardly noticeable" (Herman and Vervaeck, 2005, p. 19).

Amazingly, the achievements of the theory of narrative are very rarely applied to precisely that area where their relevance is especially high – humor. In his analysis of Oscar Wilde's and Alphonse Allais'

humorous stories, Attardo (2001b, p. 81) mentions multiple levels of embedding in narratives. He acknowledges the presence in literary texts of an implied narrator who “is saying something that the reader can tell is inappropriate. Therefore, we have to either assume lack of control of the author, or postulate an intermediate implied author being made fun of by the author” (ibid., p. 164). The implied narrator “is dissociating himself from the statement of the narrator” (ibid. p. 165).

However, when discussing jokes, Attardo (1994, pp. 277-83) takes a different stance. He disagrees with the “mention theory,” which Sperber and Wilson (1986, pp. 200-1, 240-1) formulated with regard to irony (see section 3.4). While Grice’s conversational maxims, especially that of quality, are blatantly violated in humor, the mention theory, if applied to humor, would hold that the violation is merely “enacted” by the speaker. If so, humorous utterances are metalinguistic because they only “mention” the violation. The mention can be explicit, as in the case where, according to Yamaguchi (1988), the joke’s characters can be held responsible for the violation.¹³ Attardo calls this “the weak version of the mention theory” and refutes it, pointing out that the speaker “is responsible for the narrative frame in which the reports are made,” and is therefore unable to hide behind the characters of the joke.

But what about the implicit mention, or “zero-mention,” as Attardo calls it? This is precisely the situation discussed by Eichenbaum, Shklovskii, Vinogradov, Voloshinov/Bakhtin, and by Attardo himself in his analysis of literary humor. Attardo calls this “the strong version of the mention theory,” which holds that “the violation does not take place at the same level at which the speaker places him/herself.” He rejects this version as well because “there is no trace in the text of any ‘detachment’ between the speaker and his utterance”; in fact, in “second-degree humor” the speaker (isn’t the implicit narrator a better candidate? – A.K.) deliberately fools the hearer (Attardo, 1994, pp. 284-5). According to Attardo, it is the speaker him/herself who violates Grice’s maxims. By doing so s/he switches to the non-bona fide mode of discourse. If the hearer does the same, the communication is successful even though the conversational maxims are violated.

The situation is paradoxical. On the one hand, specialists in narration unanimously assert that the narrator is present, explicitly or otherwise, in any literary work and should not be confused with the author even in ostensibly bona fide first-person narratives such as autobiographies (Abbott, 2002, p. 63; cf.: Attardo, 2001b, pp. 81, 164-5, 179). On the other hand, Attardo himself claims that in the case of everyday joking, the

narrator and the speaker are one and the same person, whatever nonsense or vulgarity this person may intentionally say or write! Kierkegaard, who had concisely formulated the strong version of the mention theory 140 years before it actually appeared under this name (see above), had every right to say that the principal incongruity in humor – that between our feigned attempt at a didactic metalinguistic utterance and the resulting joke, where precisely the comment is omitted whereas the topic remains – is noticed by no one.

The apparent solution to this puzzle is that literature is justly believed to comply with its own laws rather than with those Grice formulated with regard to everyday discourse. Jokes, by contrast, are tacitly (and no less justly) considered third-rate products and are therefore judged by the standards of everyday talk; hence the preoccupation with Grice's principles. The fact is nontrivial *per se*: while from the standpoint of semantics "all texts are created equal" since each is believed to carry some meaning, no one seems to place jokes on an equal footing with serious works of art. To be sure, they are *not* serious works of art – but does this mean humor can be productively discussed only in terms of Grice's maxims and the non-bona fide mode? Is the implicit narrator theory, aka strong version of the mention theory, irrelevant because jokes are a third-rate genre? As I see it, precisely the opposite is true.

The difference between the two approaches (non-bona fide mode and the implicit narrator theory) may appear purely terminological. Does a person putting on a mask of the "inferior Other" and pretending to be "diminished and far worse than s/he is in fact" remain him/herself? The question can be answered both ways because the expression "remain oneself" can have various meanings. The issue is not only one of terminology, however.

Humor is pretense – no one doubts this. But what sort of pretense is it? After all, serious art, too, is pretense, and all art is non-bona fide discourse. Not all art is first rate. However, some artists strive toward high standards, whereas others, specifically those creating humor, for some reason strive toward low standards. As Aristotle has observed, the writers of comedy not only "represent people as worse than they are today," but imitate "inferior people," mimic their behavior and speech. To put it another way, the distinctive feature of humor is its parodic quality. Not only Kierkegaard, but also Aristotle himself may be regarded as the precursor of the "strong version of the mention theory"! But if humor exists solely by virtue of the conflict between the author and the implicit narrator (i.e., the role which is played by the author and is

quite inappropriate for him), one may wonder what role the pretending author plays, who the implicit narrator is, and why he should be inferior to the author. These questions are neither answered nor even asked by the non-bona fide theory.

The false bottom of humorous texts distinguishing them from non-humorous ones is generally overlooked, as is the gap between the author and his role. One reason is that humor is institutionalized. Comedy is an art form that occupies its rightful place alongside tragedy. Jokes and cartoons, too, are forms of comic art. Not the highest ones, to tell the truth; and yet many of them are so witty and artistic that it is hard to imagine that their creators mock some implicit inferior authors rather than the explicit butts. Another reason is that parody is conspicuous only when aimed at specific prototypes.

On close inspection, however, a text turns out to be humorous only insofar as it is inappropriate and parodic, no matter whether or not we notice the implicit narrator responsible for the inappropriateness – a pompous nobody as in Dostoevskii's *Nasty Story*, a downright imbecile as in Mikhail Zoshchenko's stories, a cynic as in Mikhail Zhvanetskii's stand-up comedy, or an unspecified somebody, who, in the words of Chukovsky, forcibly draws us into vulgar attitudes to people, things, and events.¹⁴ In short, each humorous text is metalinguistic by nature.

The implicit narrator theory can be easily extrapolated to other forms of comic art. Thus, looking at a cartoon, too, we have, in Attardo's words, "to either assume lack of control of the author, or postulate an intermediate implied author being made fun of by the author." In this case, the intermediate figure is an unskilled artist, who, at the very least, is unable to accurately render proportions and is sometimes barely able to draw, let alone the nonsense s/he tries to convey. This "unspecified other," who is distinct from, and inferior to, the author, is present in any humorous text, verbal, graphic, or otherwise.

If we recognize this, then the so-called "semantics of humor," invariably understood as the relation of the comic text to reality (actual or imaginary), is seen in a totally different light. It turns out that humor, like parody, is not concerned with any reality at all, but exclusively with the inappropriate way reality is represented by the inferior Other.¹⁵ Consequently, a valid theory of humor must be metasemantic rather than merely semantic.

In a metasemantic theory, Narrative Strategy and Language – knowledge resources ranking lowest in the General Theory of Verbal Humor, GTVH (Attardo, 1994, p. 227; 2001b, pp. 27-8) – may actually

be the top ranking ones. What matters most is not that the joke is cast in the form of a story, a riddle, a dialogue, etc., but that each of these forms is used, consciously or otherwise, in a manifestly inappropriate and parodic manner. The main narrative strategy of humorous texts is the use of strategies that are not those of the authors/speakers, but those of the intermediate implied authors – the “inferior people.” This is what Voloshinov and Bakhtin termed “objectified direct discourse,” where the author’s speech sounds as “another’s speech,” and the narrative refers not so much to extralingual reality as to the inappropriate way of representing this reality.

It is here that the superiority theory of humor finds its proper place: not at the text level, where the target is sometimes hardly, if at all, identifiable, but at the metalevel, in the gap between the actual author’s position and that of the intermediate implied author, who is always present and is always inferior to the author.¹⁶ Who is he then? When applied to parody proper the question sounds strange – isn’t it obvious that parody is always aimed at a specific, easily recognizable prototype? After all, even theorists such as Bakhtin and Voloshinov, who have taken a huge step forward by introducing the notion of “objectified direct discourse,” viewed implicit parody as satire aimed against one of the characters. Must parody have a specific target, however?

Iurii Tynianov – one of the leaders of the Russian Formalism – demonstrated in his groundbreaking works on literary mimicry that its essence (see section 3.5, where verbal mimicry will be discussed) lies not so much in ridiculing some particular writer (although the conscious aim of a parodist may be just that) as “in revealing the conventionality of the system and transcending its boundaries,” “dialectical play with technique,” “removing the work from the system and dismantling it as a system” (Tynianov, 1977/ 1919, 1929, pp. 160, 214, 226, 292, 302).

Although Tynianov’s conclusions are based on texts of nineteenth-century Russian writers, they are consonant with the ideas of Olga Freidenberg (1973a/1925; 1998/posthumous, pp. 345-6), who, in the 1920s and 1930s, demonstrated that classical and medieval parody was none other than the necessary dialectical antithesis to everything most sacred.¹⁷ The basic, original essence of “imitating inferior people” lies by no means in the derision of specific persons or social phenomena. Where, then, does it lie? Suppose the main (although unconscious) targets of parody, and of humor as well, are language in general and our own worldview in general?

“Transcending the boundaries of the system,” transition to the meta-level, discovery of the impropriety of the text thrust on us, and a joyful readiness to accept it (as it happens when we perceive parody) – this is the difference between the perception of jokes and cartoons and the solution of problems requiring mental effort (Ruch and Hehl, 1998; Ruch, 2001; Hempelmann and Ruch, 2005). Indeed, a person trying to guess a riddle, to read a rebus, or to find out which of the characters in a crime story is the murderer will hardly be satisfied to learn that the riddle has no answer, that the rebus is a random sequence of drawings, that the murderer was never discovered and, in general, that none of it was at all serious. The effect of a humorous text, by contrast, should not depend on whether it has a resolution or not, precisely because the text is nonserious. Many people find nonsense humor no worse than other varieties of humor. Whatever the category of humor, the cognitive processes occurring at the semantic level provide only a means of abandoning semantics, shifting to the metalevel, and after the deception has been discovered, agreeing to be fooled.

Degradation and nonseriousness are incompatible with an appreciable cognitive expenditure. Intricate jokes and cartoons are hardly popular. At least adults, who, unlike children, are able to assign such quasi-puzzles their true value, tend to evaluate jokes according to the “simplest is best” principle (Cunningham and Derks, 2005). They sometimes discover the second, supposedly covert script of a joke before the punchline (Vaid et al., 2003). Giving too much credit to these third-rate products and subjecting them to a microscopic scrutiny, as most linguists do, believing that script oppositions and logical mechanisms concern the essence of the phenomenon in question, can hardly be deemed a particularly productive exercise. Similar considerations were expressed more than once by prominent humor theorists (see, e.g., Davies, 2004; Morreall, 2004; Chafe, 2007, p. 151).

Recently a controversy flared up among linguists studying humor. One side is represented by cognitive linguists (in the strict sense), who have introduced what they believe to be new approaches to the study of humorous texts. Their opponent is Salvatore Attardo. The former claim that the semantics of humor is based not on the specific logical mechanisms postulated by GTVH, but on common tropes (metaphor, metonymy, hyperbole, etc.), while pragmatically, jokes are similar to gossip and verbal assaults (Brône et al., 2006; see also Coulson, 2001; Veale et al., 2006; Kotthoff, 2006; Ritchie, 2006). In reply, the founder of GTVH accuses the cognitive linguists of using new verbiage merely

to reformulate the principles he and Raskin had formulated long ago (Attardo, 2006).

The dispute is of little relevance to us. The basic premise of both sides is the same: the meaning of humor must be sought in the semantics of the humorous text. Adhering to this position even more staunchly than their predecessors and opponents, who at least distinguish between bona fide and non-bona fide modes, and denying any difference between humor and serious discourse, cognitive linguists have not only failed to bring us closer to understanding its essence, but have led us even further down the same sidetrack. They themselves acknowledge that their scrupulous analysis of jokes and wisecracks in terms of “mental spaces,” “viewpoints,” “frame shifting,” and “reinterpretation” is equally applicable to serious texts and provides no insight into why humorous texts appear funny (Ritchie, 2006). It seems as though this problem does not concern them at all.

Basically the same applies to the theories based on notions such as incongruity resolution, script oppositeness, logical mechanism, etc. True, while we are serious, we seek to avoid incongruities and to find logic and meaning in them insofar as possible. In humor, however, everything is the other way around. Resolution of incongruity and surprise disambiguation are not the final result here, nor the aim. Rather, they are a means of confusing us and of demonstrating the failure of our common sense and of our taste, in fact, of all of our cultural equipment; but most importantly, they are a means of disclosing the impotence of language. Understandably, cognitive linguistics with its sophisticated apparatus turns out to be of little relevance here.

As soon as we acknowledge all this, the distinction between humor with resolution and humor without resolution (nonsense) disappears. In each case, we fall victim to illusion on different levels. On the level of semantics, a lover seems to be a patient, dogs seem to be interested in TV ads, and the skier seems able to pass a tree on both sides at once. The way the illusion thrust on us is motivated – whether by a marvel (as in nonsense), by someone else’s wit (as in jokes with faulty logic and incomplete resolution) or by our own momentary slow-wittedness (as in ambiguous jokes with complete resolution) – is immaterial. Whether the situation described or depicted could have actually taken place is also a question of secondary importance because the actual meaning of a humorous text, unlike that of a serious text, lies in the fact that the former only *seems* to refer to something, and it only *seems* to us that our laughter is elicited by something to which the story or drawing refers.

The real reason for our laughter, however, should be sought not in what is supposedly referred to, that is, not in the ostensible meaning of the text (which concerns us, for example, in serious works of fantasy), nor in its “actual” meaning (which concerns us, for example, in riddles or crime stories), but in the fact that *ostensible/actual* opposition inherent in the semantics of the text is neutralized at the metalevel. In other words, the real reason is that meaning disappears altogether. Not only does one of the scripts prove to be an illusion (in the case of nonsense no alternative script is offered to us), but, much more importantly, so does the meaning of the entire text. To understand humor does not mean to understand the ostensible meaning of the joke (at least, not only that); for this would mean adopting the implicit narrator’s position. To understand humor means to adopt the author’s position, to view the joke from the metalevel, and to enjoy it the same way parody is enjoyed. According to a modern psychological theory, incongruity resolution is merely a pretext for discovering that the only thing that makes sense in humor is nonsense (Ruch and Hehl, 1998). All the quasi-semantic mechanisms leading to this discovery turn out to have been the implicit narrator’s inapt invention and are ultimately invalidated.

In effect, the laughing person admits that he has allowed himself to be fooled for the thousandth time. While he was thinking (or rather, pretending to think) that he was solving an IQ problem, not only did he allow a fake to be fobbed off on him, but, in Chukovsky’s words, he was “forcibly drawn into vulgar attitudes toward people, things, and events,” or, at best, his way of thinking became primitive for a short while. As a result everything degrades: the information one has received proves devoid of meaning and value (Kant, 2007/1790, § 54; Apter, 1982, p. 180; Wyer and Collins, 1992), and the laughing person, again using Chukovsky’s expression, “feels diminished and much worse than he is in fact,” no matter whether the interpretation thrust on him is unacceptable for reasons of common sense, morality, taste, or whatever.

However, instead of expressing indignation, the person laughs; for this is just what he wanted. Sometimes he wants to laugh even when no one intends to dupe or amuse him. Psychologists studying the perception of humorous stimuli have discovered a strange fact: subjects (normal adults) under experimental conditions are sometimes unable – or unwilling – to distinguish humorous texts from serious ones, laughing at both (Cunningham and Derks, 2005).

The most ancient source of modern jokes (both with resolution and without it) was, evidently, myths about the trickster – an extremely con-

tradictory creature, cunning, in fact capable of sorcery (this hypostasis of the trickster gave rise not only to the smart heroes of folktales but also to real tramps, and subsequently to jesters, who disarmed rulers with their witty and impertinent answers)¹⁸ and at the same time stupid, even insane, a universal violator of all possible laws, natural and human alike (this hypostasis was the source of all folkloric fools; see Chapter 3; on echoes of the trickster cycle in recent texts, see Davies, 1990, pp. 132-4, 147; Kurganov, 2001, pp. 25, 33, 55, 69, 76, 129-30, 189, 192, 206; Utekhin, 2001, p. 228; Levinton, 2001, p. 232; Kozintsev, 2002a, 2007b). To designate the later (folktale) variety of this bizarre character, Iurii Iudin (2006, p. 200) suggested the term “jester-fool” (*durākoshút*).

It is in the ancient trickster myths that the appropriate inappropriate-ness (or congruous incongruity) of jokes is rooted. Had the trickster lived to this day, he could equally well project himself into the laryngologist’s supposed patient and into the cuckolded doctor himself. He would think nothing of skiing past the tree on both sides at once, and of believing that dogs can watch TV. Perceiving the humorous text, we migrate to the trickster’s world and at the same time view this world from the metalevel.

Psychologists describe the mental processes involved in understanding a joke or cartoon as the cognitive component of humor, while the strange feeling that we experience while laughing (enjoyment with a strong admixture of something else) as the affective component of humor. The cognitive component is plain and transparent; it concerns only the semantics of texts and engenders almost no debate. The affective component, by contrast, can concern both the semantics (or rather, pseudo-semantics) and the pragmatics of humor. This component is a complete mystery.

Indeed, we feel that we find pleasure in something partly illicit, perhaps even shameful. We seek (or pretend to seek) to avoid doing this, to express a negative attitude toward it. In telling a questionable joke, we at times avoid looking our interlocutor in the eyes or even cover our laughing mouth with our hand (Kuipers, 2000¹⁹; Kozintsev, 2002b, p. 171). But to no avail: these signs are perceived at best as a diffident metacommunicative commentary, not in the least making what we are trying to avoid (the questionable text and our own ambiguous behavior) less attractive. As soon as laughter stops, all the allure disappears. A breach for its own sake. Without this contradiction in our own behavior there is no enjoyment of humor.

It might appear that these considerations are an illegitimate attempt at extrapolating the perception of modern urban jokes to other social contexts. Can it be that representatives of other traditions with other ideas of taste and decorum consider their jokes fully appropriate and matching their own standards? The answer, to all appearances, is no. The standards, admittedly, are different; the jokes, too, are different, and yet the contradiction seems to be universal, whether or not the punchline is present.²⁰ Suffice it to recall Russian pre-Revolutionary peasant humor, in particular, *The Secret Tales*, the blasphemy of which sharply contrasted with the deeply religious convictions of the predominant mass of peasants. The trickster's insane pranks, too, are hardly, C. G. Jung notwithstanding, a true-to-life "reflection of an extremely primitive state of consciousness" (Jung, 1956, p. 204), although his theory of the collective unconscious, when cleansed of mysticism, is very noteworthy (see below). At this stage, it would be enough to admit that archaic people had their own tastes and their own ideas of the appropriate and inappropriate.

Wasn't the oldest European comedy based on the same purely subjective incongruity? Did it try to be a "weapon of satire" and to "destroy evil with laughter"? In *The Clouds* Aristophanes depicted Socrates as a quack and thief, although this was hardly the playwright's own view – he wasn't an idiot, after all. Neither he nor the audience destroyed the sage with laughter. Socrates was destroyed by his enemies for real a quarter of a century later. Aristophanes could hardly approve of that; for he mocked everyone indiscriminately, following an old custom observed at Dionysian festivals. He received a laurel wreath for *The Knights*, where Cleon was depicted as a buffoon, but Cleon was elected leader by the same people who had attended the performance (see Segal, 2001, p. 45).

One might refer to the close genetic bond between Old Attic Comedy and ritual, a part of which was mockery, which was in no way meant to condemn (Cornford, 1914; Freidenberg, 1973a). Incidentally, derision as well as feigned or real physical aggression (both were formerly directed at scapegoats – *pharmakoi* – and intended to ward off the evil eye and to prevent the ruin of an entire community) features prominently in ancient as well as in later comic art (see Kozintsev 2002a, for references). In *The Clouds* the son gives his father a beating and threatens to do the same to his mother (the same motifs are repeated in Plautus), as if ironically illustrating Aristotle's idea of "some blunder or ugliness that does not cause pain or disaster." Does laughing at such episodes really mean

“destroying evil with laughter?” Or could Hobbes possibly be right: our “vain glory” in not thrashing our parents irrepressibly bursts forth from our chest, forcing us to roar with laughter?

However, the main source of misunderstandings and speculations is not in the scale of what is being ridiculed, but in the idea of “imitating inferior people.” Maybe we ourselves secretly seek to imitate them in earnest? Possibly the comedy writer helps us to fulfill, if only in fantasy, our unconscious drives, as the Freudians assure us? Perhaps, for example, to get even with our parents is our devout wish?

The comic imitation of “superior people” is no less fraught with confusion. These people were imitated (if caricature can be called “imitation”) by the comic actors depicting Socrates and Euripides in the plays of Aristophanes. By contrast, the author, who compelled them to do this, for some reason (not earnestly, of course) imitated “inferior people” himself, like all his professional colleagues have been doing all along. Again, we see the intermediate implied author. In fact, we *don't see* the actual author – and this, perhaps, is the highest excellence comedy can achieve. Did Aristophanes secretly deride and expose those “inferior people,” the spreaders of silly gossip about Socrates? A caricature of a caricature – what a strange, roundabout, inefficient method of exposure!

We are faced with a huge cultural and psychological enigma that concerns not only ancient comedy, but any comedic art. By what right does it exist? For if there is a solution, then evidently neither the authors nor the actors nor the spectators nor the theorists know it. “We like it” – this appears to be the most convincing explanation. New Attic Comedy tried to stifle the question, to become more realistic, to bridge the gulf between the serious and the nonserious, comedy and tragedy, but this only resulted in total confusion.

Many, from Lessing to Soviet theorists, who advocated the principles of “satiric typification,” “realism,” and “ideological content” of comedy, did not doubt that Aristophanes was a satirist and that, accordingly, his comedies clearly betray his social attitudes, sympathies, and antipathies. But if we are trying to understand the nature of comedic art, it is completely irrelevant whether or not Aristophanes’ serious position coincided with the viewpoint, say, of the redneck Attic peasant (see Freidenberg, 1998, pp. 363-6, for more details). The crux of the matter lies much deeper, and it is always the same, whether we are dealing with ancient comedy or modern jokes.

Not only the writers and performers of comedy, but also we, the audience, become participants in the game called “imitation of inferior

people.” We are so used to the game that we almost do not sense its meaning. Here there are neither authors, nor actors, nor spectators – all play on an equal footing. The only losers are those left out. “For so it is with the great public; it loves a master of flouts and jeers, and loves him in proportion to the grandeur of what he assails; you know how it delighted long ago in Aristophanes and Eupolis, when they caricatured our Socrates on the stage, and wove farcical comedies around him.”²¹

We shouldn’t cherish an illusion that we are even a bit above such plebeian proclivities. They are rooted in human nature, not in social structure. The nature of man is known to be malleable, but only to a certain limit. Whether we are plebeians or aristocrats, whether we live in a hierarchical or in an egalitarian society, and whether we laugh at sages or fools – we are people all the same. The ability to laugh and to engage in games that involve laughter makes us all equal in some very important sense.

A game of imitating “inferior people,” a game that for some reason involves laughter... A strange game indeed! More than once it has been noted that its key element is regression (moral, intellectual, aesthetic, etc.). This phenomenon has been given various names: Herbert Spencer described it as “descending incongruity” (Spencer, 1911/1863; cited from: Morreall, 1987b, p. 108), Alexander Bain as “comic degradation” (Bain, 1880, p. 259), Alfred Stern as “degradation of values” (Stern, 1980, pp. 42-43), and Sergei Eisenstein (1966/1934, p. 487), one of the very few who was able to see the evolutionary regularity behind the psychological one, and thus conceive the real, truly vertiginous depth of the descent, used the words “obscure sphere of atavistic association.”

Indeed, does the issue concern only “inferior people”? Does primitivization reach only the level of human vulgarity, stupidity, or coarseness? No, comic art descends lower. However, not to the depths of “an evil that actually is” as Bergson (1911/1899, ch. II, pt. II) put it, but to the depths of pre-cultural primitivism.

August Schlegel observed that in terms of basic technique Old Attic Comedy and its successor, low comedy, or farce, are fables turned inside out: “In the Fable we have animals endowed with reason, and in Comedy we have men serving their animal propensities with their understanding.” (A. W. Schlegel, 1846/1809-11, p. 185). Luigi Pirandello carried this thought to utmost clarity: the plays of Aristophanes are like fables composed by a fox as revenge on people. The characters of comedy are people who reason and behave with the logic of animals (Pirandello, 1974/1908, p. 23). The animalism of comic (especially farcical) char-

acters has been discussed more than once. This is not a superhuman animalism, which makes the fighting characters of heroic epics similar to wild beasts. The heroes of comedy resemble animals only in one respect: their feeble-mindedness and primitivism.

Speaking of the “rigidity,” the “mechanical inelasticity” of comic heroes, their similarity to marionettes, Bergson (ibid., ch. I, pt. II) clearly had the same thing in mind, but no deeper pattern can be seen behind this comparison, because the idea of development and, accordingly, of regression was alien to him. People have not descended from marionettes. On the contrary, marionettes are made by people, and usually not for the purpose of creating a “degraded” image of man. In short, Bergson’s metaphor, popular as it is, explains nothing. Having written that man is an animal capable of eliciting laughter, Bergson (1911/1899, ch. I, pt. I) set out on the right path, only to clarify that an animal itself is laughable solely because of its similarity to man. Had he admitted that the opposite is true as well, a solution would have been closer.

Two thousand odd years after Aristophanes’ *Clouds* Charles Chaplin filmed *The Great Dictator*. Comparing these two masterpieces is justified not only because both were created by comic geniuses but also because Chaplin rejected the typification specific to late comedies and returned to the tactic of personal attacks inherent in Old Attic Comedy. Like Aristophanes, he turns to politics and caricature, attacking not a generalized vice, but a particular person.

Since the times of Classical Greece mankind has experienced and understood a great deal. However, the essence of comic incongruity has not only remained unexplained, but, on the contrary, for some strange reason, has become obscure in the extreme. Satire – an unnatural hybrid of laughter and anger – arose and gained immense strength. *The Great Dictator* is the quintessence of satire, its apex. In no other work of world art, perhaps, has the internal contradiction of this genre been illustrated with such clarity. Combining the enormity of Chaplin’s moral endeavor with the “hereditary virtue” of New Attic Comedy – the attempt to couple comedic art and life (*read*, seriousness), to put comedy at the service of morality and to purge from it “the inherent pleasure in the bad” – led, if not to failure, then to a truly heroic balancing on the very edge of the intrinsic capacities of the genre.

We see nothing like this in *The Clouds*, which is infinitely far from satire. There the comic actor parodies, at the author’s will, a man “better than those now alive” – Socrates. The flaws of the real Socrates are quite harmless, in full accord with Aristotle’s theory: he is eccentric,

otherworldly, ugly, defenseless... The faults of the comic Socrates are the invention of “inferior people.” In other words, the author himself, due to the vagueness of his civic position (to which parties was he not said to belong by zealots of the “ideology” of comedy!) and due to the lack of any serious moral task – deficiencies amply compensated by a boundless power to amuse – imitates (or rather, pretends to imitate) “inferior people” for the sake of the “inherent pleasure in the bad.” The end result is just what is needed – ideal buffoonery.

In the film everything is the other way around. Chaplin the actor imitates not merely an “inferior man” but the most loathsome monster ever born. The character is anything but inoffensive, defenseless, and laughable; and yet, people must be urged to laugh to banish fear. The civic position of Chaplin the director is irreproachable; from his perspective there can be no “pleasure in the bad.” Therefore pretending to be the inferior implied author is out of the question. As a result, the satirist’s task becomes virtually infeasible. But since satire goes all out to remain part of comedic art, it has to resort to artifice, for instance, by introducing comic doubles – for greater effect two at once – one good (a Jewish barber), the other bad (Mussolini, who is less malignant and therefore more vulnerable than Hitler) and, as a last resort, contrary to logic, by shifting the emphasis from the Führer to the Duce. This, indeed, is something that only an inferior implicit author can do – something worthy of parody. Ultimately, when all other devices have been exploited, the only thing left (to the detriment of the conception, but in accord with the genre) is to endow the main character, for no reason, with the attributes of a buffoon.²²

Aren’t Soviet Stalin jokes based on similar artifice? They did not pretend to be satire, though, nor were they directed against the dictator (Kozintsev, 2009).²³ The inferior narrator does not care about things such as justice, oppression, suffering, or death. For him, tragedy, provided it doesn’t concern him, is fun, harlequinade, a source of pleasure. But if the nature of comic incongruity is obscure, one can easily take sick humor for satire. All the more so as the authorities did not understand the subtleties; for them sick humor and satire were equally seditious.

The comedic Socrates in *The Clouds* steals a cloak, pretends to be levitating, and tries to demonstrate that a mosquito does not buzz with its mouth but with the opposite part of its body. The “satiric” Hitler in *The Great Dictator* mixes strawberries with mustard, hurls platefuls of food at people, bends a microphone with his voice, and bounces an inflatable globe with his rear. The trickster myths grant equal rights to

the superior and the inferior; in fact, they make no difference between the two. A clown is a clown; he represents no one; he does not and cannot have any concrete prototype in the real world. His only prototype is “man in general” – Homo sapiens.

As we see, the problem lies not only in the fact that the Aristotelian requirement that the faults of the comedic object be inoffensive is observed in *The Clouds* (if not on the level of treatment, then at least on the level of choice) while being violated in *The Great Dictator*. If Chaplin could afford to shift to sick humor, as the authors of Stalin jokes did, the invalidity of this requirement would have become evident at once because, as it turns out, it applies only to satire, not to humor. The problem lies not in the object, but in the subject: which position will he take – that of the satirist or the humorist. No matter who was reflected in the false mirror of Aristophanean humor – Socrates or a demagogue like Cleon – the result was the same for a very simple reason. At every step and by his own feigned stupidity Aristophanes derives (and affords us) the pleasure that comedy requires. And the same is true of Chaplin in most of his films. However, in *The Great Dictator*, except for a few episodes, this path was closed to him. Satire cannot cope with its task even if the satirist is a genius.

1.2 Subject and Object: Relation and Metarelation

Let us try and generalize what was said about comic incongruity. Theories of the comic fall into three groups: objectivist (“stimulus-side”), subjectivist (“response-side”) and relationist (“whole-process”), depending on what or whom the theorist sees as the source of incongruity – the object, the subject, or the supposed relation of subject to object, respectively (see, e.g., Dziemidok, 1992; Latta, 1998). Aristotle, relating the comic to an imperfect but harmless object, takes an objectivist stand, but in speaking about the imitation of inferior people, he appears now as a relationist, now as a subjectivist, depending on whom he considered “inferior people” – the object of ridicule or the object of imitation for the subject.

Note that in the latter case “inferior people” (“buffoons” and those who laugh with them) are merely models of behavior for us rather than objects of any relation. “The buffoon is one who cannot resist a joke; he will not keep his tongue off himself or anyone, if he can raise a laugh...” This implies that the buffoon is indifferent to the qualities of real objects (any trifle can provide a pretext for laughter), which also includes indifference to himself. Insofar as we can imitate him, we take the same

stance – any objects around us, irrespective of their qualities, temporarily become for us mere pretexts for fun. In other words, having fallen under the spell of laughter, we turn into pure subjectivists and at times “will not keep our tongues off ourselves or anyone, if we can raise a laugh.” Clearly, such a stance has no moral justification (who would disagree with Aristotle here?), but if we behave otherwise, then subordination to fun is still incomplete and a fraction of seriousness remains in us. We have to choose – or balance on the edge. “Anesthesia of the heart,” which Bergson correctly considered one of the main characteristics of laughter, excludes any relationality.

The most subjectivist theory of the comic is that of Jean Paul²⁴: “The comic like the sublime never resides in the object, but in the subject” (Jean Paul, 1973/1804, p. 77). Before him Kant took the same position; in fact, he abandoned the concepts “funny” and “comic,” so as not to attach excessive significance to what he considered only pretexts for laughter (for more detail, see: Kozintsev, 2005). All we know about humor and laughter today speaks in favor of such a view.

However, Jean Paul displays inconsistency. He is correct in speaking about the complete subjectivity of the comic. He is also right in holding that the comic, being in essence “debasement,” is opposed to the sublime. But these are not extremes of a single type but phenomena of different types. Placing the comic and the sublime on an equal footing, Jean Paul deprives the former of qualitative originality. Subjectivistically minded English-speaking humor theorists proceed likewise, sometimes recalling a seemingly apt adage “Beauty is in the eye of the beholder.” Or in the words of Camões,²⁵ “what I long for is already in me.”

The parallel, however, is faulty because not a single serious feeling resides completely in the subject. Any sense except the sense of humor is relational; it includes both a subjective and an objective component.²⁶ When reality, whether actual or imaginary, is perceived seriously, this basic principle is unaffected by any differences between the feelings.

A feeling can disagree with reason. In this case the subject is divided. For example, in Kantian aesthetics “that is beautiful which pleases in the mere judging of it (not in sensation or by means of a concept)” (Kant, 2007/1790, p. 97). In psychoanalysis the subject’s non-identity with him/herself culminates in antagonism between the super-ego and the id (see below). But even though the subject is divided, the object of a serious relation is single, and both conflicting aspects of the subject compete for it. Despite perceiving the object differently, they still agree that it is one and the same object. In philosophical terms, their intentionality

is the same. Their rivalry is sometimes called “ambivalence.” During reflection a serious metarelation arises, that is, a relation to a relation, for example, that of reason to feeling, of the super-ego to the id, or vice versa. A serious metarelation is accompanied by a relation of each of the subject’s competing aspects to the object, which is single and belongs to the external world, real or imaginary.

Instances of extreme subjectivity, located on the brink of madness, but at times beyond the brink, merely confirm the unity of the object of a serious feeling and its reality for the subject. Don Quixote, one of the most subjective, serious, and sublime heroes of world literature, attacks windmills not, of course, because the object of his wrath is a figment of his imagination, but in spite of this. When the ability to reflect returns to him, his reason enters into a struggle with his feeling, trying to debase the object of the feeling and bring it closer to reality. The feeling, however, does not yield, and then reason looks for a compromise, attempting to make the object more real without debasing it. “And moreover I think,” says Don Quixote, “and it is the truth, that that same sage Frison who carried off my study and books, has turned these giants into mills in order to rob me of the glory of vanquishing them...”²⁷ (this psychological compromise is discussed in Dostoevskii’s essay “A Lie is Saved by a Lie” in *A Writer’s Diary*, September, 1877). A likewise serious metarelation, which sacrifices part of the fantasy to preserve the reality of the object and the integrity of the subject, we see in the case of “Dulcinea del Toboso”: “It suffices me to think and believe that the good Aldonza Lorenzo is fair and virtuous;” admits Don Quixote, “and as to her pedigree it is very little matter.”²⁸

As we see, contrary to Jean Paul’s claim, even in such an extreme case the sublime cannot reside solely in the subject – it tries its best to be objectified. The discrepancy between the real object and the imaginary one imperils the sanity of a serious man, forces him to persist in his delusion and to attempt in every possible way to avoid ambivalence and self-repudiation. Therefore, a serious metarelation cannot be viewed as completely subjective; it includes the relation to the object, even if the latter is transformed or even created by fantasy.

A reversal of signs of judgment does not change the essence. A misanthrope, who views the world “through dark glasses,” is just as serious, tries with the same stubbornness to convince himself and others of the “objectivity” of his attitude, likewise tries to substantiate this attitude by means of a metarelation, and likewise avoids psychic duality.

The situation with the perception of the comic is completely different. In the early 1900s, Luigi Pirandello wrote in a book on humor, now almost forgotten, that the basic mechanism of humor is a particular reflection that generates a “feeling of the opposite” in the subject. Humor, according to Pirandello, is a “phenomenon of doubling in the process of creation.” All artists reflect on their creation, but humorists, unlike others, do this openly, while their reflection is not simply a mirror reflecting a feeling. For them, reflection stands before feeling, detaches from feeling, analyzes it, and dismembers its imagery. The humorous reflection is “a mirror of icy water, in which the flame of feeling not only looks at itself but also plunges in it and extinguishes itself: the sizzling of the water is the laughter that the humorist evokes” (Pirandello, 1974/1908, pp. 112-3, 118). In spite of the dismal tones characteristic of Decadence (Alexander Blok’s shiver-provoking *Irony* was published in the same year), Pirandello’s basic idea is correct.

In fact, Pirandello’s theory appears to have a much broader meaning since “the feeling of the opposite” is peculiar not only to professional humorists. Isn’t man in general – Homo sapiens – a less rational being than commonly believed? In his short story *The Imp of the Perverse* (1845), Edgar Poe described “a propensity which, although obviously existing as a radical, primitive, irreducible sentiment, had been equally overlooked by all the moralists.... The idea of it has never occurred to us, simply because of its seeming supererogation.... Induction, *a posteriori*, would have brought phrenology to admit, as an innate and primitive principle of human action, a paradoxical something, which we may call *perverseness*, for want of a more characteristic term. In the sense I intend, it is, in fact, a *mobile* without motive, a motive not *motiviert*. [T]hrough its promptings we act, for the reason that we should *not*. In theory, no reason can be no more unreasonable; but, in fact, there is none more strong.... I am not more certain that I breathe, than that the assurance of the wrong or error of any action is often the one unconquerable *force* which impels us, and alone impels us to its prosecution.” The theory is amply illustrated by the behavior of Dostoevskii’s heroes, and in the early 1900s, André Gide introduced the notion of unmotivated action (*acte gratuit*), which became central to existentialist thinking, culminating in Camus’s *L’Homme révolté*.

While Poe, Dostoevskii, Gide, Sartre, and Camus referred to serious, in fact, fatally irrational acts, for which no motive other than craving for freedom for freedom’s sake can be found (Ivan Pavlov spoke of “the reflex of freedom” inherent in both humans and animals), one only needs

to miniaturize the Imp of the Perverse and confine this genie within a bottle – our imagination – to understand that humor is basically a revolt against rationality. A playful revolt, to be sure. A quarter of a century before Poe, William Hazlitt (1819, p. 11) wrote, “As we laugh from a spontaneous impulse, we laugh the more at any restraint upon this impulse. We laugh at a thing merely because we ought not. If we think we must not laugh, this perverse impediment makes our temptation to laugh the greater; for by endeavouring to keep the obnoxious image out of sight, it comes upon us more irresistibly and repeatedly; and the inclination to indulge our mirth, the longer it is held back, collects its force and breaks out the more violently in peals of laughter.” Can we try and recast these romantically irrational ideas in a more rational if less elegant form?

Whereas a serious feeling, a serious thought or a serious utterance about anything at all establishes a first-order relation – between the subject and object,²⁹ a nonserious thought or a nonserious utterance, the object of which, at first glance, is the same, builds on top of the basic relation a second-order relation – that of the subject to his own relation. But a nonserious metarelation unlike a serious one is completely subjective. It is based on pure reflection, and this reflection is antagonistic to a serious relation.

Humor proper is nothing but pretense, the subject’s total playful detachment from, and rebellion against, his self. According to Fónagy (2001, p. 276), “a funny remark can be regarded as a verbal act followed immediately by its invalidation: ‘I didn’t mean it, I was only joking...’ Such paradoxical, self-defeating statements represent the basic form of funny remarks.” It is not that one part of the self rebels against another, as in the case of a serious metarelation; but that the subject as a whole, with all his thoughts, feelings and judgments in toto, rebels against himself, pretending to be totally different – “inferior,” in Aristotle’s words. This accounts for the split between the author/speaker and the implicit narrator of humorous texts.

For a serious person self-repudiation is painful as it threatens the integrity of his self; but to a humorous rebel it brings only pleasure. Nothing threatens him; his self remains intact; simply in play it pretends to be different, which allows man to look at himself from the outside. His self-defeating revolt is purely for show; it does not mislead anyone except humor theorists.

A serious person repudiating his/her own views is responsible for a past mistake. A nonserious person is free of all responsibility. S/he cannot

make any mistakes in principle provided nonseriousness itself is not a mistake. S/he only temporarily becomes stupid, plays the fool, and, as everyone knows, fools rush in where angels fear to tread. The person remains him/herself, only an illusive, zany double appears.

“If you don’t want to see a buffoon, break the mirror,” runs the motto of one of the French medieval “sociétés joyeuses.” This thought has deep roots in European soil; it was expressed by many, from Seneca to Erasmus. In Holbein’s illustration for *In Praise of Folly* the jester’s mirror double sticks out his tongue at his original.³⁰ The image of a buffoon looking in a mirror or showing other people their mirror reflection (always foolish) is known in various cultures from Western European to Chinese (Otto, 2001, pp. 98-9). This theme evidently accounts for the fact that jesters and clowns often appear in duplicate, and that pair members can be indistinguishable, mirroring each other, as it were (Willeford, 1969, pp. 34, 38, 40-8, 52; Kozintsev, 2002a). The “stupid” twin of the cultural hero, his jester double, sometimes representing a debased, caricatured, “trickster” image of the hero himself, is present in many mythologies (Meletinskii, 1988).

The playful metarelation, unlike the serious one, does not lead to an internal conflict because only one of the competing hypostases of the subject – the serious one – establishes a relation with the external object. This object is perceived by the subject as real and single even if it is completely fictive and even if the two conflicting parts of the self perceive it differently. By contrast, the other hypostasis – the nonserious one – does not face outward, but inward, toward its “rival” – seriousness, that is, toward the totality of what the subject at any given moment thinks and feels, whether consciously or not. The incongruity does not arise within the self in its present form, but outside of it, just as the incongruity between man and his reflection in a distorting mirror arises outside the human body. Humor, unlike serious reflection, allows the self to look at itself from the outside and to negate itself in play.

How then does it originate – this gap permitting the self at play to go beyond its confines and look at itself from outside? It is a natural consequence of changes which the self undergoes over time. Man in his present and past, whether individual or evolutionary, in a sense remains the same. And yet any two stages of his ontology or evolution taken separately can be seen as two separate and different subjects that perceive the same object differently and negate each other. Accordingly, the objects, in spite of their seeming permanence, are different as well. These illusive multiple objects, strikingly dissimilar to the single object

which appears before the serious (albeit possibly divided) subject in the present, are what humor plays with.

The deeper the descent into the past, the stronger the contrast and the keener the pleasure from play. This imaginary journey back in time, to the earlier stages of mental development, accounts for “comic degradation,” which many psychologists and philosophers discussed in the past. Most modern humor theorists, however, tacitly consider the regression theory *démodé* and discredited by psychoanalytic misuse. Only very few follow Aristoteles in recognizing that degradation is the basic principle of humor (see Apter, 1982, p. 180; Wyer and Collins, 1992, for rare exceptions). The contrasting scripts and frames, which the linguists believe to be of critical importance for the perception of humorous texts, are objective, static, equivalent, and serious, whereas the main contrast (which can be observed only from the metalevel) – that between the subject’s seriousness and his own playful pretense – remains in the shade.

Thus, humor, unlike seriousness, is based on a pure metarelation. It does not include the relation to the external object, but, on the contrary, excludes it. The playful metarelation, unlike the serious one, is not negative. It does not reverse the meaning of the serious relation, as happens in the conflict between reason and feeling, but neutralizes it, leaving room for easy and careless play with pure fiction, which the subject himself perceives as fiction, not as reality. The reverse order of events is also possible: first a pretext for play is found, and then the humorous metarelation uses that pretext to disable seriousness.

The only objects of the playful metarelation are the subject’s own thoughts, and the mechanism of humor consists in their distortion and degradation, or even in the complete disappearance of their meaning, that is, of their connection with the referents. Feelings, too, are disabled or debased by means of “anesthesia of the heart.” This psychological regression, however, is not in earnest. The controlling authority – seriousness – is only temporarily disabled. Having had a laugh, the subject finishes playing with his own distant past and returns to the present.

Therefore, contrary to many theories, ambivalence (dual relation of subject to object) is absent in humor. And since the self is not divided, there is no need for any compromises either. The laughing subject, unlike the serious one, is not afraid of admitting that his object is a figment of his imagination, a distorted, debased, “funhouse mirror” image of his own thoughts and feelings, that is, something strikingly contrasting with the object that the subject himself perceives as real or possible when s/he is serious. The subject fully recognizes this contrast; in fact, s/he

emphasizes it in every possible way, and thanks to this (not despite this, as in the case of a serious feeling rebelling against reason) s/he experiences true pleasure. For the time being, we will merely note this strange peculiarity of the human mind without discussing its possible causes.

Don Quixote, performing feats for the glory of her whom he calls Dulcinea del Toboso, is utterly serious. He is no less serious when he obeys Carrasco, who has downed him; and only when Carrasco calls Sancho's wife Teresa by the name of a lady of the romances – Teresaina, – Don Quixote forgets his own feeling for an instant and laughs. The fictional Teresaina is a caricature of the hyper-real Dulcinea. Having fallen from the empyreal heights and landed on the level of earthly common sense, Alonso Quixano contemplates from this level the absurdly debased image of his own sublime fantasy.

The same thing happens when the subject becomes a pseudo-object, a pretext for someone else's laughter. The reason for this is the same conflict of two incompatible points of view (the serious and nonserious) and the same neutralizing metarelation of the subject (now already another) to his own seriousness. Jean Paul (1773/1804, pp. 77-8) wrote that a person behaving foolishly will seem funny to us provided we "lend" him our own sensible view of things, that is, in Jean Paul's words, we "attribute," or "impute" ("*andichten*") pretense to him. Due to this "momentary illusion of intent," which we recognize as an illusion, we see not a real person, who can evoke our discontent or sympathy, but an imaginary clown, whose only purpose is to engage us in play at "imitating inferior people" and thereby to amuse us.³¹

It is not enough, then, to imagine that one is pretending (for example, Hamlet, who was really pretending to be insane, could be suspected of pretense, but this would not make him appear funny): we must attribute to that person the intent to amuse us. And only one thing is required of us – temporary psychological regression. Quite simply, we are expected to forget (or rather, to pretend that we have forgotten) all the serious thoughts and emotions associated with the object. Isn't earthly common sense more primitive than Don Quixote's noble madness? Debasing the situation and using the humorous metarelation to "attribute" to Don Quixote the intent to play the fool, we identify with him, become engaged in imaginary play, and fancy ourselves behaving the same way; however, in so doing we retain the capacity of reflection.

Is it necessary, however, to choose between these two views– from within or from without? What if our habitual idea of a "funny object" and a subject laughing at him misleads us? Isn't it enough to imagine that

we all are equal participants in a single comic performance, laughing at ourselves and looking at others as if they were fun-house mirror images of ourselves? What if our laughter is not a reaction to the incorrectness of others' behavior, as we are accustomed to think, but a sign that we consider our own behavior and perception incorrect? What if laughter is none other than a sign of self-repudiation? We won't be able to answer these questions before we examine biological facts about laughter.

In sum, not only is the laughing subject not identical with himself, but also the objects of his competing hypostases – the serious and the nonserious – are different. The first belongs to the world which the subject considers real or possible; the second is completely fictitious and in no way aspires to objectivity. It is this second, fictitious object invented by the subject – the so called “comic image” – that is the pretext for laughter. The relation to the real or possible object plays no role whatever here. And although dozens of theorists worldwide analyze what they call the semantics of humor, we arrive at an unexpected conclusion: *humor has no semantics*.³² There is nothing paradoxical or unusual about this: parody, too, has no semantics. What does have semantics is the parodied text, whereas the sole purpose of parody is to undermine this semantics without suggesting any alternative. By the same token, the sole purpose of humor, which is completely self-reflective and self-referential, is to undermine any semantics underlying the subject's serious relation to the object; for it is this relation that humor parodies.

It might be argued that parody, being an apophatic affirmation of propriety, should have more not less meaning than the inappropriate original. This is not so. Humor disables the subject's serious relation – any relation – to the object. Wallace Chafe (1987) has called this the “disabling mechanism.” The object provides only a superficial pretext for disabling any meanings and for playing with empty envelopes of former signs or, to use Kant's expression, with “representations of the understanding, by which, all said and done, nothing is thought” (Kant, 2007/1790, p. 160; see below). Therefore the object of humor is neither reality nor imagination but solely the way these are represented.

In other words, one can speak of semantics only if one perceives the object seriously. To study what we call the “semantics of humor,” we need to view comic texts as serious ones, that is, to forget about their rationale. And, vice versa, to laugh, we must temporarily forget all thoughts, emotions, and judgments that we could associate with the given characters, situations, or events if we were to take them seriously. Laughter disables any semantics, turning it, in Kant's words, into nothing.

Thus, we can laugh at Don Quixote's adventures only after our humorous metarelation has temporarily disabled our serious relation to him, that is, has forced us to forget all the thoughts and feelings we have associated with him. The traditional belief that humor is genial and expresses the subject's sympathy for the object stems from the inability to distinguish a relation from a metarelation. One can speak of geniality, sympathy or, contrariwise, of any negative attitude only if the object is perceived as real or possible, but not if it is considered a pure fiction. This is what Bergson had in mind when speaking about the "anesthesia of the heart" accompanying laughter (Bergson, 1911/1899, ch. I, pt. I). Don Quixote as a flesh and blood person, a noble madman arousing admiration and sympathy, and Don Quixote as a clown, a pure comic image, a figment of our imagination are not only different objects; they also live in different worlds, on different levels of our psyche. The second, illusory image appears only for a short while and only to be ousted, like the mock god of Saturnalia or the mock king of Carnival, by the first image, which we consider real or possible. The scripts and frames whereby we perceive these different images cannot be placed on equal footing. Between the "high" (serious, even tragic) script and the "low" (comic) one lies a long path of mental development, both individual and collective.

Similarly, there is no point in discussing what attitude toward Stalin the Stalin jokes express (Kozintsev, 2009). The serious attitude of the inventors and narrators of jokes and of their audience to this historical figure could fall anywhere in the range from love to hatred. But during the laughter game this attitude was temporarily disabled, it literally "turned into nothing."³³ The so-called "object" of jokes, like that of parody, does not belong either to reality or to any of the possible worlds. Whom or what we believe to be the object of the joke is not an object at all. "Stalin jokes" are not about Stalin; they are about his comic double, an inapt imitator, a mock god, a mythical trickster, a homonymous clown superficially resembling his prototype in appearance and mannerisms. If the object of humor coincided with the ostensible object of the joke, we would by no means find these stories amusing. By the same token, Chukchi jokes are not about the Chukchi; they are about a fool's view of the Chukchi. And, of course, dead baby jokes are not about dead babies; they are about some unspecified cretin – the implicit narrator – who is trying to relate shocking things in a ridiculously inappropriate manner. Jokes never mock their ostensible targets; rather, they mock all the stupid ways a real or possible object can give rise to a stupid representation. Those who consider jokes a source for studying politics and public

opinion are frequently puzzled by what they believe to be the ambiguity of these stories. But jokes are not ambiguous, they are parodic. And it is a bad idea to use parody as a source of knowledge about the reality to which the original refers or even about the original itself.

In sum, humor is the subject's relation not to the object, but to himself at another stage of development. It is not a cognitive, but a purely metacognitive phenomenon. Accordingly, to explain it, we need a metacognitive rather than cognitive theory. The humorous metarelation is secondary to the serious relation and cannot exist without it, as it most unambiguously parasitizes it. Any thought, any feeling, any judgment, any relation can serve as a nutritious medium for a humorous metarelation. In other words, we can laugh only at something, or rather, use as a pretext for laughter only something that we have recently treated (and, probably, will again treat) seriously.

At first glance, the laughter of children at what they could not, at their age, have treated seriously contradicts this. But this is true only from the adults' standpoint. If one takes into account the child's own constantly shifting point of view, then laughter is always preceded by seriousness or even fear. Both are eventually defeated by laughter (Chukovsky, 1963, p. 601; Levine, 1977), but both can return if the comic object becomes real or possible. Thus, a young child can start crying when a clown approaches too near (Daniels, 1974). A new level of seriousness and new fear provide a new pretext for laughter. The "parasitism" of laughter with respect to seriousness is in no way fatal for the self, but on the contrary, is salubrious for it.

With this in mind, the paradoxical logic of the archaic consciousness (or rather, of the archaic unconscious), which periodically mocked everything most sacral in seasonal rites of renewal, becomes easier to understand. The distinction from the child's mind is that the latter develops progressively, whereas the dynamics of archaic traditions is cyclical: stasis is regularly interrupted by periods of festive license. Olga Freidenberg (1973a/1925) wrote about the religious concept of the "second aspect," about upholding the sacral by the reviving power of deception and laughter. Long before we heard of "symbolic inversion,"³⁴ she had argued that the aim of ancient parody was most pious: the original was temporarily hidden and replaced by a likeness: "The dual world was always and everywhere manifested by two opposite types of phenomena, one of which parodied the other" (Freidenberg, 1998 [written in the 1950s], p. 345). While being ostensibly blasphemous, ancient parody, in Freidenberg's words, does not denigrate gods, but

rather mocks us – “in fact, so skillfully that we still take it for comedy, imitation or satire” (Freidenberg, 1973a/1925, p. 497). Similar views were much later expressed by Conrad Hyers (1969). Gilbert Keith Chesterton (1919, p. 20) had the same thing in mind: “Blasphemy is an artistic effect, because blasphemy depends upon a philosophical conviction. Blasphemy depends upon belief and is fading with it. If any one doubts this, let him sit down seriously and try to think blasphemous thoughts about Thor. I think his family will find him at the end of the day in a state of some exhaustion.”

Today, this paradox can be seen not only as a manifestation of dialectics, but also as a purely psychological phenomenon. Indeed, the metarelation is a reflection on a serious relation: “If we must accept this world as it is, then we have a subject for laughing and can occasionally laugh at our own seriousness.” Archaic people drew a further-reaching conclusion: “we can *and must* laugh.” Hence the compulsoriness of laughter rituals in traditional society. William Stanner, who described Tjirmumuk – the Australian aboriginal feast of “upside-downness,” which was preceded and followed by solemn ceremonies, commented, “An observer has the sense of a negative affirmation of what was affirmed positively in the first phase.... It is as though things had turned upside down” (Stanner, 1989, pp. 64-5).

But if so, then a second-order reflection is possible as well – metareflection about a metarelation: “One can’t laugh at what is absent. If our own seriousness sometimes makes us laugh, that means we seriously accept this world as it is.” Or, as Stanner formulated it with regard to the Australian rite where solemnity gave way to festive license: “It is as though the statement ‘everything that is *Karwadi* [the solemn stage] is sacred’ now had the form ‘nothing that is not *Karwadi* is sacred’” (ibid., p. 65).

Negation of negation returns us to the starting point. The likeness is expelled and the original returns to its rightful place. The age-long order of things remains unshaken, in fact, it has become even more stable after having passed through the liminal stage, when all meanings were temporarily abolished and the world was renewed (see Kozintsev, 2002b). Like light and shadow, seriousness and laughter are incompatible, but cannot exist without each other. Jung (1956) had every reason to call the trickster (the universal mythical violator of norms and prohibitions) a “shadow.” The shadow setting off the light and allowing culture to look at itself from outside – this is what Chesterton called the “artistic effect.”

However, let us return from the collective level to that of the individual and listen to Kant – our speculations appear to agree extremely well with what he spoke about. The reason for laughter, in Kant’s opinion, is “play...with representations of the understanding, by which, all said and done, nothing is thought,” while pleasure from this play “may amount to an affect, although we take no interest in the object itself, or none, at least, proportionate to the degree of the affect” (Kant, 2007/1790, p. 159). And the most famous (and at the same time the most enigmatic) passage: “Laughter is an affect arising from a strained expectation being suddenly reduced to nothing... We must be careful to observe that the reduction is not one into the positive contrary of an expected object – for that is always something, and may frequently pain us – but must be a reduction to nothing” (ibid., p. 161).

These words were written more than two centuries ago. The theory of humor was but a small brick in Kant’s edifice. And yet Kant grasped something that modern semanticists, who believe that script oppositions and frame shifts are key elements of humor, apparently neglect altogether. Incidentally, as the results of psychological experiments demonstrate, the frame shift involved in the perception of a joke does not occur immediately after the punchline, but only a few seconds later. During these seconds the laughing person is in a state of blessed “no-thought”³⁵ when neither of the two scripts is activated (Vaid et al., 2003). What is that but Kant’s “nothing”? And, returning to the collective mind, doesn’t temporary abolition of all cultural meanings and the neutralization of all oppositions – the basic feature of archaic festive rites of renewal – correspond to the same salutary state of “nothing”?

In short, the comic incongruity, unlike the serious, in particular, tragic incongruity, lies neither in the object nor in the subject’s relation to the object. As Jean Paul correctly stated, it resides entirely in the subject. The object of the humorous metarelation is completely embedded in the subject; it consists solely of the subject’s feelings, thoughts and words, of his internalized social programs. They can be, but do not have to be intrinsically contradictory – this is not the point. The point is that all these subjective contradictions along with feelings, thoughts and words themselves can be temporarily neutralized, turned into “nothing” on the metalevel. This distinguishes subjective contradictions from objectives ones, which can be resolved, but not neutralized.

Disregarding this, Dziemidok (1992, p. 17) “refutes” Kant’s idea by what he believes to be counter-examples. A pupil is terrified that he will be called to the blackboard, but the teacher unexpectedly stops her

questioning; relatives of a sick person expect him to die soon, but he suddenly recovers. The strained expectation, it would seem, has turned into nothing, but where is the laughter? Clearly, no one laughs, for the contradiction was part of reality. In Kant's terms, people did not receive "nothing"; what they received was a "positive opposite of the expected subject" – a successful outcome instead of a catastrophe. The contradiction has been successfully resolved, but the opposition has not been neutralized; people look at the situation from the same level on which they were – from the level of a serious relation. They were lucky, but they could as well have been unlucky.

Now suppose some push had caused the perception to shift to the metalevel, on which people's recent fears, if only for a short time, would have turned into nothing, into a pretext for play. Imagine, for example, that the teacher stopped her questioning because a barking dog had run into the classroom; or the doctor who had given the sick person a terrible diagnosis turned out to be a quack and absconded with the hospital's cash. Objectivists and relationists might argue that such debasing twists in the plot have nothing to do with the preceding events and are funny per se. No, a barking dog per se would scarcely provoke laughter, just as neither quackery nor theft normally make us laugh. Nor should incongruity per se amuse us if the two opposed scripts are equally rooted in reality or in imagination. In these situations, however, the two scripts are not equivalent. The second one is only a pretext for debasing the first one, for detaching it from reality or from imagination, and for neutralizing the serious opposition inherent in the first script (*luck/bad luck; life/death*), having reduced strained expectation to nothing. Humor is the neutralization of all possible oppositions, except one: *seriousness/nonseriousness*.³⁶

No more convincing is another objection Dziemidok levels against Kant: strained expectation is unnecessary in humor since it's possible to see the same comedy several times, to enjoy the same joke, etc. (Dziemidok, 1992, p. 18). True, but then don't we listen over and over again to the same piece of music where strained expectation may likewise be suddenly resolved? By the way, Kant had good reason to compare humor to music (for more detail, see Kozintsev, 2005).

What matters for us, however, is not what unites humor with other senses, but what makes it unique. Jean Paul was wrong in placing the comic on an equal footing with the sublime. Humor is the only sense that "never resides in the object but in the subject." This applies to no other feeling – not even to organic sensations such as pain or hunger. In

those cases, too, as in the case of the most complex senses like that of beauty, the subject objectifies the source of the feeling and perceives it as part of reality. However dissimilar, even antipodal human senses might be, however different they be in their complexity, humor is opposed to all of them taken together.

But if so, can humor be called a sense? Strictly speaking, no, although the age-long tradition prevents us from abandoning this usage. If possessing or experiencing a sense implies the ability to perceive and adequately interpret certain stimuli, then it must be admitted that humor is merely a malfunction of this ability (a very beneficial malfunction, though). In other words, this quality is completely intrinsic to the subject, whereas the role of the object is minimal.

According to Kant (2007/1790, p. 164), the sense of humor is but “the talent for being able to put oneself at will into a certain frame of mind in which everything is judged on lines that do not follow the beaten track (quite the reverse in fact).” “A person with whom such variations are not a matter of choice is said to have humors; but if a person can assume them voluntarily and of set purpose (on behalf of a lively presentation drawn from a ludicrous contrast), he and his way of speaking are termed humorous.”³⁷ Kant’s words that humor reverses the ordinary way of judgment are followed by an intriguing reservation: “and yet on lines that follow certain principles, rational in the case of such a mental temperament.” Believe it or not, Kant had concisely described the “local logic” (alias “logical mechanism”) two centuries before the terms were introduced!

But how can one adopt the “topsy-turvy view of things” while remaining sane? In other words, what is humor proper? The answer is provided by the Reversal Theory formulated by Michael Apter (Apter, 1982; 2001). According to Apter, in each moment of his/her life a person can be in one of two diametrically opposed metamotivational states – either in the telic or in the paratelic. In the telic phase, we are interested in the goal (*telos*), which we strive to achieve as quickly and easily as possible, with minimal arousal. In the paratelic phase we find the activity rewarding by itself, whereas the goal is mere pretext, and we delay its achievement in every way possible, trying to maximize arousal. Or, as Kant put it, “pleasure...may amount to an affect, although we take no interest in the object itself.” In other words, the end and the means switch places.

This leaves no room for the notion of “optimal arousal” postulated by certain humor theorists (Berlyne, 1972) because stimuli that are unpleasant in the telic phase are pleasant in the paratelic and vice versa. The

abrupt switch between the two psychological phases, and the absence of any intermediate states are the key elements of the Reversal Theory (Apter recalls René Thom's catastrophe theory, but for us in Russia dialectic leaps are nothing new after seventy years of Hegelo-Marxist indoctrination.)

Hunting for subsistence and for pleasure are psychologically opposed activities. But a reversal is also possible during a single activity. Thus, a man driving a car to work can be now in the telic phase (trying to arrive quicker), now in the paratelic (deriving pleasure from driving and from getting past any obstacles, and unconsciously striving to prolong the trip).

Although Apter views humor as merely one of paratelic states, actually its status is very special. Humor is the quintessence of the paratelic condition, its ideal model. A laughing man forgets not just his proximate goals, but ultimate ones as well – any goals at all, – and pretends to reverse the signs of all judgments, which for some reason is immensely gratifying for him. Obviously, any intermediacy is out of the question here: we speak and act either seriously or not.

These views flatly disagree with the objectivist and relationist theories of humor from Aristotle (“[The laughable] is some blunder or ugliness that does not cause pain or disaster”) to Hegel and Soviet theorists (“vices and crimes cannot be funny.”) Sick humor in no way fits into the Procrustean bed of these theories, yet it fits nicely into Kant's definition of humor – “the talent for being able to put oneself at will into a certain frame of mind in which everything is judged on lines that do not follow the beaten track (quite the reverse in fact),” if only it is remembered that humor reverses the relation not to things but precisely to judgments. Indeed, no theme is off-limits for joking, as amply demonstrated not only by sick jokes, but also by any art, whether collective or individual, unbound by censorship – from Aristophanes to Shakespeare and from Russian Secret Tales to Mother Goose Rhymes.³⁸

The Reversal Theory helps us understand why satire is an internally contradictory phenomenon. When a person condemns, s/he is the telic state and expresses a negative attitude to people, things, and events. When a person laughs and makes others laugh, s/he is in the paratelic state and expresses a playfully negative attitude to his/her own thoughts, feelings, and judgments, much like Hogarth did in his *Satire on False Perspective*. These states are diametrically opposed; in fact, there can be nothing intermediate between them. Either – Or.

“Man, being a rational animal,” George Santayana mused in perplexity, “can like absurdity no better than he can like hunger or cold” (San-

tayana, 1955/1896, p. 152). In other words, humor can not and should not gratify us – and yet it does. Why? Now we know at least part of the answer. It is neither absurdity nor evil that brings us pleasure, but solely the playful disablement of a serious attitude to anything at all. The humorous metarelation temporarily turns thought, words, and judgments into nothing. Not into a serious opposition, as Kant emphasizes, but precisely into nothing. Debasement occurs only on the level of the metarelation, but the relation itself remains intact.

In other words, the intentionality of a jocular metarelation is entirely different from that of a serious relation. Humor is completely self-intentional, that is, it has no objects either in reality or in fantasy that is perceived seriously (i.e., as reality). Comedy – provided it adheres to its fundamental tasks – is aimed neither against persons nor against vices nor against social institutions, but solely against the author’s own feelings, thoughts, and words. Aristophanes did not mock either Socrates or Euripides; the object of his pretended mockery was his own serious attitude to these people. Whatever it may have been (maybe positive, maybe not), it is impossible to deduce it from the comedies. The properties of real objects are but a pretext for comic reflection. There is no such thing as “nonserious relation.” What we call a “nonserious relation” is not a relation at all.

Objectivists and relationists might ask a baffled question: if the object’s properties are relevant for a serious relation to it, why should they be irrelevant for a humorous relation? To reiterate: a humorous relation to an object does not exist. There exists a humorous metarelation, whose sole function is to disable the serious relation. The intentionality and quality of the latter are irrelevant because whatever they might be, they are disabled anyway.

A Soviet joke from the Brezhnev era can serve as an illustration (some jokes prove longer lived than the times that produced them). “You don’t have any cheese, do you?” a customer timidly asks the sales clerk in a shop. “We don’t have any sausage,” she answers, “The place where they don’t have any cheese is across the street.” Such, indeed, is the relation of humor to reality. A joke on any theme, all its topicality notwithstanding, is a statement that just that particular theme is not to be found in it.³⁹ Kant’s “strained expectation” does not imply that the listener is anticipating a serious conversation on a topic supposedly set at the beginning of the joke (after all s/he is already in a humorous mood and knows that there won’t be any such conversation). What s/he anticipates is a push which will turn the topic into “nothing,” and all that

will remain of it are empty words, which can be juggled, or, as Kant put it, “representations of the understanding, by which nothing is thought.” Thus, the joke above only seems to address food shortages. It turns out, however, that it addresses purely formal linguistic issues – the functional sentence perspective (the sales clerk takes the theme of the question for the rheme and vice versa), and on a broader plane, the pragmatics of communication. Specifically, the sales clerk violates Grice’s second maxim of quantity: “Do not make your contribution more informative than is required” (Grice, 1989, p. 26).

But when viewed from the metalevel, this, too, is irrelevant! Linguistic problems, of course, are completely devoid of interest either for the narrator or for the listener; they are merely means of deflecting attention from what seemed to be the topic of the narrative and disabling a serious attitude to reality. Contrary to the linguists’ opinion that humor is mostly referential and functions on the level of the signified and not of the signifier (Attardo, 2001b, p. 23; Hempelmann, 2004), the basic function of humor is to obliterate reference and to displace the signified by the signifier (see section 3.3).

Therefore both polar views on the relationship between laughter and the bad – the optimistic (“we destroy the bad by laughing”) and the pessimistic (“laughter expresses pleasure in the bad”) – prove equally illusory. Laughter has no designs against the bad; nor does it transform the bad into the good. It merely neutralizes the *good/bad* opposition, along with all other oppositions on which our worldview is based. That is why the themes of most jokes are so salient: hot issues are temporarily neutralized by humor. The more painful the topic, the more acute the pleasure from its neutralization. Hence the healing effect of humor.

This does not run counter to Kant’s idea that pleasure from the play with empty representations of the understanding “may amount to an affection, although we take no interest in the object itself.” Even if we do take interest in the object to which the joke seemingly refers, the reference proves spurious; the object has evaporated, and this is where the reason for the affection lies. To consider humor a “mirror of life” is even more naïve than to consider art in general such a mirror. Topical themes are only a pretext for humor. Thus, for a generation that has no idea what food shortages are, the joke where this topic provides a pretext can fall flat. And yet a huge body of humorous texts addresses themes that are either not topical at all or topical in a broadest sense, not in any specific historical context. Such, for example, is world folklore about the stupid and the canny (Davies, 1990, pp. 10-39). The opposition appar-

ently derives from the two hypostases of the single figure – the mythical trickster. This paradoxical duality, which is still traceable, for example, in traditional British jokes about the Irish (*ibid.*, p. 147), could also be manifested in two separate and opposed mythical figures – the cultural hero and his stupid twin (Meletinskii, 1988). Which ethnic, territorial or social groups feature as “stupid” and which are “canny” in modern jokes is a matter of secondary importance,⁴⁰ although the pretext is usually provided by actual circumstances (the geographical and social marginality of the “stupid,” the high competitiveness of the “canny”). But this is only a pretext; after all it would be strange to expect realism from trickster myths or animal tales (the folklore types from which modern ethnic humor derives).

According to Davies (1990, p. 130), “jokes are ambiguous comic utterances that have a life of their own.” Ethnic jokes, as he has demonstrated, evidence neither hostility between the groups allegedly referred to nor a lack thereof nor even the interest of these groups in each other: “The same joke can be used for all manner of conflicting purposes, or none at all” (*ibid.*). Ethnic stereotypes, which have traditionally been considered a *sine qua non* of such folklore, often prove unnecessary. Moreover, as the genre develops, jokes about various groups tend to become independent of ethnic stereotypes and eventually lose even the slightest remnants of realism (Davies, 2004), reverting, as it were, to their source – the trickster myths.⁴¹

While there are no forbidden grounds for humor in art, a serious attitude to certain things in actual life can hardly be shaken. Exceptions, however, are possible even here, and they mostly concern one’s own sufferings and death.⁴² Many experience aversion to sick humor, especially to “sadistic” jokes about the death of children (Herzog and Anderson, 2000). Likewise, Chaplin’s conscious hatred of Hitler blocked an unconscious humorous metarelation. When such a metarelation nevertheless arises in satirists (in spite of the author’s intention or in the hope of compromise), satire drifts in a direction contrary to the intended – toward ordinary comedy. Laughter as a “weapon of satire” is a utopia engendered by Hegelian objectivism and the didactic programs of Marx-ist aestheticians. Such programs can be efficient only on the opposite, tranquil side of the comic, for instance, in the relations of mothers to playful toddlers whose innocent faults “do not cause pain or disaster” and are in fact better corrected with laughter than seriousness.

With the exception of these extreme cases, anything in the world admits both a serious relation and a humorous metarelation, the former

being the precondition of the latter. To agree with Hegel and his followers that “[It] is not possible to joke in an external way about what does not contain matter for joking or irony in itself,” and that “the comic consists in showing how a man or a thing dissolve by themselves in their conceit” (Hegel, 1995/1816-26, pp. 427-8; corrected after the original) is tantamount to claiming that dialectic is funny. Even Eisenstein (1966/1934, p. 516; 2002/1940-48, p. 242), whose monumental, but, regrettably, uncompleted and almost unnoticed theory of the comic bears a strong imprint of Hegel’s ideas, considered the comic but a parody of dialectic.⁴³

What, then, remains after a serious attitude to an object has been disabled? What is the difference between a comic image and a serious one? In the first place, the comic image has no independent meaning – it only parasitizes the serious image and temporarily supersedes it. This, indeed, is its only *raison d’être*. A purely comic image is vacuous and primitive, its possible artistic merits notwithstanding. Its connection with the object (real or imaginary) is purely formal. It is not an image of the object but a parody of this image. It is the “likeness” with which, according to Olga Freidenberg, ancient people temporarily replaced the original for the sake of upholding it: “Here and everywhere in classical antiquity ‘the comic’ is that which usurps the formal aspects of ‘the real’” (Freidenberg, 1973b/1945, p. 512). The words “in classical antiquity” appear redundant; the rest is absolutely exact.

Thus, the object gives the subject only a formal pretext for disabling the serious relation. Having taken advantage of the occasion, the subject regresses to the mental level of a young child, a drunk (Bergson, 1911/1899, chap. III, part III; Freud, 1981/1905, pp. 176-7) or a mentally retarded person⁴⁴. Ernst Kris (1964, pp. 178-9, 202-3) has written about caricature as controlled regression, both ontogenetic and phylogenetic (similar observations about the regressive nature of the comic were made by Eisenstein, see below). In short, the laughing person becomes plainly stupid. Speaking of medieval parody, Dmitrii Likhachev noted that its characters were subjects, not objects. The parodist did not tower over them, but descended to their “foolish” level. While “playing the fool,” man laughs at himself, and the essence of laughter has always been the same (Likhachev et al., 1983, pp. 7, 10, 12).

In the “foolish” worldview, the image “usurps” (in Freidenberg’s expression) the formal, external, accidental features of the object. As a result, the comically transformed image of man resembles an animal or a thing, while animals and things resemble people. A pure comic image

reflects neither feeling nor thought nor the subject's relation to the object. In effect, the comic image is a pseudo-image, a temporary, deficient, and inadequate substitute for the serious ("clever") alternative.

It is clearly wrong to believe that the ideal comic image must be grotesque, fantastic, or distorted; indeed, grotesqueness, fantasticality, and distortion are often coupled with seriousness and even horror. The comic image can be endowed with neatly caught features that are outwardly realistic, and such features are often accented in jokes and cartoons. Foma and Yerema – twin heroes of the Russian comic folk poem – are not at all fantastic, and yet it would not be the slightest exaggeration to say that "these heroes are absent... these heroes are not real, they are puppets, senselessly and mechanically echoing each other" (Likhachev et al., 1983, p. 23; see also: Kozintsev, 2002a). Aristophanes' Socrates is the same sort of puppet, despite superficial features of similarity to the real, living prototype. This is not an image of Socrates, just as Foma and Yerema are not images of two harmless imbeciles suffering undeserved tortures and dying an absurd death. Just as little sympathy is evoked by heroes of Edward Lear's limericks and cartoons, though many of them drown, burn to death, split in halves, etc.

The primary source of comedy lies not in the object, but in the fact that the subject ceases to take the object seriously and replaces it by a primitive likeness, a puppet, a pretext for laughter, arbitrarily invented by the subject, who suddenly becomes so primitive himself that he temporarily loses the ability to reason, judge, resent, sympathize, feel shame, etc. Besides the artistic skill necessary, indeed, only to prepare and arrange the sudden collapse of seriousness, the subject maintains only a superficially grasping observation (even this, however, often proves unnecessary) and a capacity for very primitive associations, that is, qualities with which babies, mentally retarded or intoxicated people, and animals are endowed.

"Pure comic images" – "likenesses," according to Freidenberg, – predominated in Old Attic comedy, and after the comedy had "sublimated," they became elements in folk theatre, farce, harlequinade, circus clowning, that is, in all low genres of comic art. "Pure comic heroes" – these, in Likhachev's words, "artificial heroes," "puppets," "non-existent characters" – fill comic folklore from trickster myths to modern jokes.

To the extent that feelings and thoughts associated with the object regain relevance for the subject, the image ceases to be fictitious, "foolish" and purely comic. It either grows genial, comes alive, sublimates (this is what theorists who use the notion "humor" in the narrow sense,

investing it with sympathy for the object, have in mind), or, alternatively, it becomes satirical. The reverse development is also possible. In Charles Philipon's famous caricatures the image of Louis-Philippe is gradually metamorphosed into a pear,⁴⁵ turning from a realistic image into a satirical one, and eventually becoming vacuous and fictitious. "Where will you stop if you follow the principle you're supposed to adopt?" asked Philipon, answering charges before the jury and drawing all the stages in his evolution of the king's head into a fruit, "You will sentence a man to two years in prison for drawing a pear that resembles the king!" (Kerr, 2000, p. 83).

The huge gallery of comic images in world literature is a continuum ranging from pure comedy to seriousness. Fluctuations between a puppet-like primitiveness and realism are often appreciable in the treatment of single characters (in particular, those of Cervantes, Dickens, Gogol, Chekhov, etc.). The line between the serious and nonserious is movable and fuzzy. The reader can draw it nowhere near to where the author put it (this is where the subjectivity of comedy appears). And yet each of us at each specific moment is quite capable of assessing his/her own mental state as either serious or nonserious.

Chekhov's *Seagull* has the subtitle "comedy." Did this word perhaps mean something different for him than for us? Indeed, the laughter of spectators at the Petersburg première meant a flop, and the audience at the Moscow Art Theatre, which greeted the play enthusiastically, did not laugh. How, indeed, is one supposed to laugh when the action irreversibly progresses toward the hero's suicide? But Chekhov's attitude toward *The Cherry Orchard*, which most of us find no more amusing though it bears the same subtitle, does not permit variant readings: "... The entire play is cheerful, flippant.... It turns out that I have written not a drama, but a comedy; partly even a farce" (Chekhov, 1982/1903, pp. 248, 252). He treated *The Three Sisters* the same way, despite the hopelessly melancholy atmosphere of the play, the absurd death of one of the heroes and the subtitle – "drama": "Even now it seems to him," Stanislavsky commented perplexedly, "that *The Three Sisters* is a right jolly bagatelle" (ibid., p. 562).

A more eloquent argument against objectivist and relationist theories of the comic can hardly be imagined. Who would claim that Chekhov considered what he had depicted in these plays unworthy of a serious attitude? The spurious paradox will disappear as soon as we recognize that the observed effect was caused not by a shift in the author's serious relation to objective reality, but by his subjective nonserious metarela-

tion to his own words, thoughts, and feelings, that is, by their playful debasement.⁴⁶

A writer cannot expect that people will treat his creation seriously if he calls it a “tragedy,” “drama,” or “epic” without weighty reasons. One who does this will become a laughingstock. Nothing, however, prevents the author from calling his work a “comedy” and even a “farce,” no matter what people would think of it. Bad writing cannot be saved that way, but in any case it is easier for an author to debase the ostensible meaning of his work at his own whim than to sublime it; for the presence of thoughts and feelings where they are out of place is accepted more readily than their absence where we expect them (unless we shift to the metalevel and rejoice in the author’s failures). Before Chekhov, Balzac took advantage of “the right of debasement,” and before him Dante did the same. However, in both cases the attempt to look at human passions “from above” excluded a comic spirit. God can scarcely enjoy farces. In Chekhov’s case, however, we have no choice but to take his words at face value. So it seemed to him – and no other explanation is needed. “The comic never resides in the object, but in the subject.”

1.3 Funniness and Ridicule: An Essay on Nonentities

At the heart of any feeling, of any attitude lies an evaluation of the object. Many humor theorists, like lay people, believe that laughter, too, is an evaluation: in laughing, we evaluate the object as funny. Language itself prompts us to think this way: the word “funny,” like the words “beautiful,” “terrible,” “surprising,” “disgusting,” etc., formally assigns the corresponding quality to the object. But what sort of quality is it? How can we define our relation to the “funny” object? As soon as we begin pondering these seemingly simple questions, we feel that the answers elude us, no matter which word we take – “funny,” “laughable,” “comic,” “ludicrous,” “ridiculous,” or “amusing.” What funniness is, what feeling it evokes in us and why it causes laughter – this turns out to be beyond our understanding. From age seven or eight on, we use these words unmistakably and unthinkingly⁴⁷ without being able to explain their meaning. “The meaning of a word,” said Wittgenstein, “is its use in the language” (*Philosophical Investigations*, par. 43). If so, we can speak of things we don’t understand at all. This, indeed, is the way we use the words referring to laughter.

To avoid the boomerang effect of circular lexical definitions (“amusing” means “causing laughter,” whereas “laughter” means “an expression

of amusement”), naïve speakers, on whose ideas explanatory dictionaries are based, have supplied the words referring to laughter with secondary meanings that are *prima facie* inherent in the object rather than in the subject. Thus, the word “funny,” like the French word “*drôle*,” can mean both “amusing” and “strange,” “warranting suspicion” (hence the question “Do you mean funny ha-ha or funny strange?”; see Morreall, 1987a). On the other hand, the word “ludicrous,” like the Russian word “*smeshnoi*” (literally “laughable”) can mean both “funny” and “absurd,” “incongruous.” Not only are these secondary meanings different from those of the word “funny,” but moreover, they are quite different from the primary meaning of all these words – in fact, inconsistent with it! If things warrant suspicion, if they are strange, absurd or incongruous, they are not fun. They normally arouse a serious feeling (suspicion, amazement, disapproval, irritation, etc.) rather than laughter. What happens is that naïve speakers intuitively adopt the objectivist Aristotelian view of the laughable, and this acceptance leads to cognitive failure.

Language contradicts itself here. In creating alongside the primary meaning of a word a secondary meaning which is not only independent of the former, but also at odds with it, language replaces a fictitious quality (“to be funny”) with a real but different quality. Actually language imposes the Aristotelian theory on us.

On close inspection, words referring to laughter are pseudo-evaluations; they do not characterize the object at all. The laugher rejects feelings and judgments and forgets about any relation to anything. Laughter, like death, is justly considered the greatest equalizer. “Comic degradation” returns us to such a low level of development that we cease to distinguish the better from the worse, wisdom from nonsense, the reasonable from the incongruous, beauty from ugliness. If the object is in any respect above us, we degrade it in our imagination with laughter, degrading ourselves in the process (this is, apparently, what happened at performances of *The Clouds*).⁴⁸ If the object is below us, we descend to its level, again irrespective of our serious relation to it. In this case it doesn’t matter who makes us laugh – a child, an animal, or an actor portraying a drunk. A drunk himself can arouse in us some feeling; yet if we have burst out laughing, this means that any feelings and judgments have been temporarily suspended. This is why satire, which is always based on feeling and judgment, cannot use laughter as a weapon.

However, because laughter is involuntary, spontaneous, and unconscious, people – the laughers, the “targets,” the observers, and even the theorists – misapprehend it and couple it with feelings and judgments,

as evidenced by the word “ridicule.” Returning to dictionary definitions, “ridiculous” can mean both “laughable” and “worthy of derision.” Most of Vladimir Propp’s book is devoted to “derisive laughter” (Propp, 1997, pp. 23-194); in the West, evaluative theories of laughter, centered on the notions of “ridicule” and “superiority,” are very popular (see, e.g.: Gruner, 1997; Buckley, 2003). The supposed connection is so deeply ingrained in language and mind and seems so self-explanatory that an attempt to question its existence appears perplexing.⁴⁹ And still, strange though it seems, we are faced here with yet another figment, a nonentity resulting from faulty interpretation. What language does this time is to impose Hobbes’s superiority theory on us.

The inconsistency of the superiority theory has been pointed out time and again. For example, is the greater risibility of women and children as compared to men really caused by their higher sense of superiority? Does their laughter stem from “vain glory”? Is it not more likely, on the contrary, that risibility evidences freedom from pride? This argument against Hobbes was made by Jean Paul (1773/1804, p. 85). In his words, “the feeling of pride is very serious and not at all related to the comic, although it is related to the equally serious feeling of scorn.”

Countering the superiority theory, the British psychologist James Sully wrote: “I feel the impulse to laugh at a ‘guy’ in the street who captures my roving nonchalant eye long before I reflect on any loss of dignity which the bizarre costume may signify. In sooth, if, in this first happy moment, any distinct thought of the personality behind the wild, startling figure floats up to the surface of consciousness, it is a friendly one. I am disposed to like and feel grateful to the person who thus for an instant relieves for me the insufferable dullness of the spectacle of London citizens all dressed according to one stupid fashion” (Sully, 1902, p. 124). These, of course, are the words of a gentleman of the late Victorian era but also those of a psychologist who was ahead of his time (see section 2.4 for more details about his theory). No doubt, Sully fathomed both the universally human meaning of play at “imitating inferior people” and the emptiness of the concept of “ridicule.”

The idea that the so-called “object of ridicule” evokes in the laugher not a sense of superiority or schadenfreude, but, on the contrary, a blissful insensibility and thoughtlessness caused by liberation from seriousness, that is, by an imaginary psychological regression, is absolutely correct. Laughter supersedes any feeling. It is single and does not fall into categories such as “derisive,” “genial,” “malicious,” “cheerful,” etc.

Why then are there so few people who want to play a clown or a jester? Why is it so intolerable for most of us to be the targets of what we call “ridicule”?⁵⁰ The reason is that the unconscious ancient festive feeling of collective degradation is superseded by the conscious and historically later thought of the loss of individual dignity. The more correct this idea, the more serious it is, the less compatible it is with laughter. Incompatibility is complete when the “laughingstock” is someone who has obtained spurious dignity unjustly, for example, a dictator (see above). In this case both the object of derision and its subject are least of all inclined to cheerful play. Anger takes hold of them both, the unconscious is superseded by the conscious, the metarelation is replaced by the relation, and laughter is silenced by seriousness. And yet, by force of habit we use the word “laughingstock” without being able to separate its primary meaning, related to laughter, from the secondary one, related to contempt.

The same applies to the results of recent psychological experiments that have led Rod Martin to question the idea that humor is single, and to distinguish four independent types of humor – two “healthy” and two “unhealthy” (Martin, 2007, pp. 276-82, 299-305). The “healthy” varieties are labeled “affiliative” (promoting positive interpersonal relationships) and “self-enhancing,” whereas “unhealthy” humor is supposed to be either “aggressive” or “self-defeating.” As laughter and humor are manifestations of playful pretense and self-repudiation, such labels must be attached not to them but to seriousness, which is mixed into them and to which laughter and humor are intrinsically opposed.

Humor scholarship abounds in references to the “object” of laughter. Almost everyone agrees that we laugh either “with someone” or “at someone” or we assign roles, casting someone as a partner, someone as the object. This is how we are all used to thinking. Over and over we hear that laughter is intentional in the philosophical sense, that it is always “about” something or somebody, and that it must have an object or even a target (“butt”). Isn’t it clear, for example, that the public at the première of *The Seagull* at the Aleksandrinskii Theatre poked fun at Chekhov and Komissarzhevskaja?⁵¹ In many cases, admittedly, the butt of ridicule cannot be identified by any stretch of the imagination. Nevertheless, the target is one of the knowledge resources (joke parameters) in Attardo’s GTVH (Attardo, 1994, p. 224; 2001b, pp. 23-4) – an optional one, admittedly, but still a parameter. The idea that the humorous metarelation is directed not outward, but inward, at the subject, and, hence, that it cannot have any targets in the external world, either actual or imaginary,

stubbornly refuses to sink in – it contradicts not only common sense but also language, which compels us to reckon with the existence in it of such words as “ridicule” and “target of ridicule.”⁵² No wonder: common sense and the relation to the “butt” are parts of our consciousness, whereas the metarelation functions on a deeply unconscious level.

Look at children teasing someone. Say, a “funny” boy in glasses or with a speech defect. The victim, unlike the teasers, is in no mood for laughing. Who is he then but a target? And hasn’t it always been this way? Wasn’t Socrates a butt for Aristophanes, and did he find the gibes pleasant? Who were Chekhov and Komissarzhevskaja for the Petersburg public but targets, and did this laughter leave them untouched?

True, psychological regression – the “imitation of inferior people” – sometimes takes us far. Maxim Gorki, in an essay ironically titled “The Laughable,” describes situations of chillingly aberrant laughter during war (from veterans’ accounts). One story goes like this: soldiers lead away an old peasant woman’s cow, dooming her grandchildren to starvation. One of the soldiers writes her a “receipt”: “This self-same old woman has lived ninety years and expects to live just as long, but she surely won’t do that.” “And he signed it, the son of a bitch: – ‘the Lord’ ... And this occurrence made us laugh so hard we couldn’t walk. We stopped and we roared with laughter till we cried.” Here’s another “laughable” situation, written down by Gorki from a soldier’s story. Human entrails scattered by an explosion are dangling from trees. “It was ever so funny to see those guts on snags.... Afterwards, I felt a bit downcast.” Viktor Shklovskii, in his notes about the Transcaucasian front in World War I that became part of *A Sentimental Journey*, tells about an officer laughing at the sight of a “grotesque body” assembled by soldiers (in a truly Bakhtinian spirit) from parts of several human bodies torn to pieces by an explosion⁵³.

Discussing such things from the standpoint of our own worldly wisdom and our own beliefs and taste is pointless. To speculate, uninformed, whether this is the same laughter as that of mothers playing with toddlers or a different one, is likewise futile. The next chapter will hopefully provide at least part of the answer.

At this point it would be reasonable to distinguish the cause of laughter from the pretext for laughter. Kant must have had a reason to abandon the terms “funny” and “comic” and to speak only of the pretexts for laughter. A “funny” animal, a “funny” baby, a comic mask – are but pretexts for laughter. A “funny” boy in glasses, a “guy” in a London street, the old peasant woman, Socrates, Chekhov, Komissarzhevskaja – are likewise

neither objects nor targets nor causes of laughter, but merely pretexts, no matter whether the laughter of spectators is consistent with the author's intention, whether the spectators mock the author, the actors, or both, or whether there are neither authors nor actors at all, and the comedy exists only in our imagination. Pretexts are infinitely diverse; the comic reflection is eager to fasten, like a parasite, on any serious relation so as to disable it and to allow our imagination to play with "representations of the understanding, by which nothing is thought." Laughter is never directed against anyone. In the outside world there exist only pretexts for it. The true and only cause for laughter is always in us. "What are you laughing at? You're laughing at yourselves!" This metatext is voiced by one of Gogol's characters in the finale of *The Inspector General*. To whom is it addressed? To the spectators, Gogol's contemporaries, watching the play during the reign of Nicholas I? Or to all of us? If only we succeeded in thinking this thought through to the end!

Nevertheless, a great many theorists wisely avoid vexing their mind with insoluble problems and deem it best to follow naïve speakers. Allegedly standard examples of the "funny" have been listed a thousand times over. Socrates, according to Plato's *Philebus* (48-50), considered funny the harmless and vain people who imagine themselves cleverer, wealthier, or more beautiful than they actually are. In an eleventh century Chinese treatise, included in *Tsa-tsuán*,⁵⁴ the following cases of the "funny" are listed: "a host who has fouled the air in the presence of guests; a dressed up country girl from a brothel; a lanky man in short pants; a woman falling from a horse; a sorcerer invoking spirits; two quarreling stutterers" (Velgus, 1975, p. 60). American children of the late 1800s found the following pictures especially funny: mice running into a sleeping man's mouth; a woman whipping her husband; a goose in the teacher's chair; a jug of water over the door to be emptied on the person opening it; etc. (Hall and Allin, 1897, p. 40).

Vladimir Propp (1997, pp. 42, 224) found funny a lecturer on whose nose a fly had landed; also a fat man stuck in a doorway; a clown who had dragged along with him a gate so as to pass through it; and a person who had dropped a bag of eggs which turned into a liquid mess. In addition, he considered a giraffe funny because of its "disproportion" (Propp, 1997, p. 229).⁵⁵ A leading American authority in the aesthetics of the comic, Mary Collins Swabey, in full earnest, gave a detailed explanation of why ducks are funny (Swabey, 1970, p. 10).

Hans Jürgen Eysenck noted that humor theorists of the past had for some reason deemed two situations exemplarily funny: when someone

stumbles and falls and when the wind blows someone's hat off his/her head. The results of the direct observations he conducted in city streets were disappointing: in seven cases of falling and in five cases when the wind had blown someone's hat off, not a single person among more than one hundred passers-by laughed (Eysenck, 1942).

It is quite probable that if such scenes had been filmed and shown at the movies, they really would have aroused laughter (not to be considered oddballs, we usually laugh there and then, where and when custom requires)⁵⁶. The same thing applies to all the examples of "funniness" listed above. Undoubtedly, absurdity, incongruity, and degradation are seen in all of it, deliberate or not. But a great many such instances leave us completely indifferent; or, if degradation evokes some attitude in us, this attitude may be quite serious (anger, disgust, disappointment, sympathy, etc.); sometimes we even try to interfere and correct something. By contrast, humor, which is a metarelation rather than a relation, is outside this category, in particular, outside morality. Besides, humor is not limited to passive contemplation of the degraded; it tries its best to degrade and spoil everything around. Only the humorous reflection with which the author of the comic text has infected us or which we have evoked of our own accord produces the expected effect.

Recall boring lessons at school where nothing whatever "objectively funny" could be detected – and yet everything could suddenly seem insanely funny: the buzz of a fly, the cawing of a crow in the courtyard, the squeal of a piece of chalk, the teacher's dress, her voice, the way she pronounced scientific terms... "The teacher was bad," an objectivist or relationist will say, "that sort of thing doesn't happen at interesting lessons." As much as I remember, the issue was not in the teacher, but in me. But even if the problem were with her – was it really impossible to mobilize the last bits of seriousness, to concentrate, and to get as much as possible from the lesson (after all one still has to study)? And yet, any situation worthy of a serious attitude can be degraded and perceived as comedy. Or, to use Kant's ingenious formula, as "play with representations of the understanding, by which nothing is thought."

Jean Paul's idea that our comic perception of people is based on a "momentary illusion of intent," that is, on "inventing" that people play the fool, is highly noteworthy (Jean Paul, 1973/1804, pp. 78-9). But if "the ridiculous being must at least have the appearance of freedom," then why not attribute a comic intention to inanimate objects as well? In for a penny, in for a pound. After all, it's only a matter of appearance.

Perhaps Jean Paul would disagree; for all his subjectivism, the objects of comic perception for him as well as for most other theorists are only people or, at the very least, the results of their activity: "... The heaviest bales of the German book trade, which in reality crawl along in an annoying and disgusting way, at once assume wings as works of art if anyone imagines (and thereby lends them higher motives) that they have been written for parodic amusement" (ibid., p. 80). Many extend the realm of the comic to animals resembling people, but "a landscape cannot be funny" is such a commonplace that no one remembers any longer whether it was first said by Bergson, Chernyshevskii⁵⁷ or someone else.

Indeed, objectivists and relationists, who believe that being funny is the prerogative of the object, find it natural to confine the comic perception within certain boundaries. But such a restriction contradicts a well-known law. The Russians call it "the law of universal rascality," and its equivalent in the English-speaking world is Murphy's Law: "If anything can go wrong, it will." The charm of this law stems from its being universal, and the folklore associated with it is immense. But if we can attribute the ability to play tricks on us to anything in the world, and if we don't do this seriously, then, in effect, we attribute (in full conformity with Jean Paul's theory) to anything in the world the ability to amuse us. The only stipulation is that the words "go wrong" make sense in Murphy's Law, and for this purpose we need only imagine (or, to use Jean Paul's expression, "invent") that the entire world around us is a comic performance with all its elements – the actors, scenery, and properties.

If so, then in a certain frame of mind we can be amused by the "ill-timed" bark of a dog, by the "importunate" squeal of chalk, by a mountain that is "too steep," and by vegetation that is "vulgar" – in fact, we sometimes say "sham." We ourselves don't often contrive to invent such things. After all, a buttered piece of toast with its objectively inherent trickster-like predilections⁵⁸ is one thing – and a sublime landscape which, unlike a piece of toast, does not care a fig about us is quite another thing. But then we ourselves should not specially "lend" our view of things to a landscape – this is what cartoonists and creators of animated films do for us.

1.4 Who is the Inferior Other?

In experiments by the Swedish psychologist Göran Nerhardt subjects were asked to look at outwardly identical metal cylinders, to guess their weight, and then to verify their guesses. The cylinders had been specially

prepared to mislead: some turned out unexpectedly heavy; others, unexpectedly light. The subjects laughed, and the greater the discrepancy between their expectations and reality, the more they laughed (Nerhardt, 1970). Some theorists, including Nerhardt himself, have interpreted this as confirmation of Schopenhauer's version of incongruity theory: the cause of laughter is "the apprehension of the incongruity between what is thought and what is perceived" (Schopenhauer, 1987/1844, p. 60).⁵⁹ Is it seldom, however, that we apprehend this incongruity, suddenly, with amazement, and without laughter?

The subjects laughed as soon as they picked up the cylinders, that is, clearly before they were able to retrieve the notion of specific gravity, assimilated at high school, from their long-term memory. In other words, the incongruity remained unresolved at the moment of laughter, as it also happens in nonsense humor (Deckers, 1993). As Schopenhauer (*ibid.*) would have said, "reason was for once convicted of insufficiency."

Of course, this invalidation of reason, of that, in Schopenhauer's words, "strict, untiring, troublesome governess," is not a relational phenomenon, but a purely subjective one; an illegitimate one, in fact, because it means regression to the "original kind of knowledge inseparable from animal nature" and based on perception rather than thinking (*ibid.*). Having fallen into the unpredictable world of willful things, an adult, while remaining himself, simultaneously becomes a helpless child, like Alice in Wonderland, where each object is animated and enters into strange relationships with us, while we invariably are duped. Or perhaps man takes the attitude of his remote ancestor, for whom everything around him was alive and unpredictable? Or again, he looks at himself, a modern man, through the eyes of his remote ancestor: "Goofed, eh? What about your cultural expertise?" If something like this happens, it does so instantaneously. Unlike knowledge, which was acquired from outside and possibly not well assimilated, man's memory (whether acquired or inborn) of his own or his ancestors' worldview in the past is always with him and can wake at any moment.⁶⁰

A simultaneous view of reality from two different and incompatible points that correspond to two stages of the subject's evolution or ontogeny – this indeed is the basic comic incongruity. Recall the last phase in the perception of jokes and cartoons, where a person, independently of whether s/he is offered "resolution" or not, switches to the metalevel and laughs for some reason at realizing the deception. The issue, therefore, is not the resolution of incongruity and not incongruity as such, but the invalidation of reason. Can it be that the metalevel is the level

that permits man to look at one stage of his own ontogeny, phylogeny, and social history from the perspective of another stage?

This is precisely what Sergei Eisenstein asserted. The comic, according to his theory (its fragments are preserved and were published as transcriptions of lectures on directing and as drafts of his unfinished monumental work *Grundproblem*), is an attempt to connect two extremes – philistine commonsense and the notions of a savage (Eisenstein, 1966/1934, p. 481-2; 2002/1940-48, pp. 424-5). It is a “system of proto-logical views against a background of post-logical ideas.” The comic “compels the modern mind to assume the appearance of the primitive mind, but in so doing retains all the properties of the modern mind and all its knowledge.” A juxtaposition is necessary – if only for an instant – of these two diametrically opposed strata; otherwise man either is submerged in the “unbroken gloom of primitive beliefs,” or turns into a philistine, incapable of understanding “what’s funny about this.” The idea of a regressive component in the comic (and in human mind in general) is consonant with the views expressed in Russia by L. S. Vygotskii and A. R. Luria (1993/1930), and Olga Freidenberg (see Ivanov, 1976, for more details), and in the West by C. G. Jung (1956).

We can adopt Eisenstein’s theory as a starting point, but with one important reservation. Hegelian objectivism, which permeates it, prevents us from understanding that the comic is purely subjective. However, Eisenstein’s idea that the comic is “formal dialectic,” a caricature of dialectic, means in effect that the source of this quasi-dialectic lies not in the object, but exclusively in the subject.

To show “how a man or a thing dissolve by themselves in their conceit,” contrary to Hegel, does not necessarily mean to be in the realm of the comic – a great number of disciplines that objectively explore the contradictions inherent in man and society are concerned with this. Art is concerned with this. However, only a laughing man is capable of experiencing his own contradictory essence subjectively and of rejoicing in his imperfection. He does not, as Hegel put it, “joke in an external way about what does not contain matter for joking or irony in itself” – he simply jokes about himself. The sole object of laughter is the subject himself in his present and past, his own and that of his species. The subject’s non-identity with himself, the perception of this non-identity, self-repudiation – this is the entirely subjective dialectic on which humor is based.

Both mutually negating views – “top down” (that of one’s own stupidity from the standpoint of one’s own cleverness) and “bottom up” (that

of one's own wisdom from the standpoint of one's own folly),⁶¹ and all the more from both viewpoints at once – contain an enormous charge of comedy. An electric discharge that flashes between these oppositely charged poles turns to ashes all our attempts at comprehending and describing the “semantics of humor.” Only the most intellectual being in the world is capable of contemplating, even if unconsciously, its own development and of enjoying its own temporary folly!

With this approach the difference between the sense of humor and all other feelings and attitudes becomes understandable. Each human feeling has traversed a long path of evolutionary, historical, and individual development and is the end point on this path. But in a serious feeling, the developmental “memory” is present only implicitly. Our worldview, which is the sum total of all our emotions and thoughts, is static for us at any given moment. It is single, equal to itself; it is such as it has become. It is intentional; it is directed primarily toward the real or imaginary world and only secondarily toward itself. This static state is what we call seriousness.

The sense of humor, by contrast, is thoroughly dynamic. Humor results from self-reflection that has become independent of our worldview. This split could have taken place only at a higher – human – stage of mental evolution. Humor is opposed to all other senses because it has no objects either in reality or in imagination. It is self-intentional; its sole object is our worldview; however, not in a static but in a dynamic state. The path of humor is always degradation, sliding downward, an imaginary regression to an earlier stage of development (individual, historical, evolutionary) and the acquisition of the capacity of looking at one stage of development from another. This instantaneous temporary descent has become possible only thanks to the long and difficult path upwards, the path taken both by the individual him/herself during his/her life and by the entire human species during its biological and cultural history. Who would doubt that sliding downhill requires no effort and is much more pleasant than scrambling uphill? The actual way upward went on for years and millennia; the imaginary path downward lasts several seconds. This explains humor's tremendous allure.

The dynamic approach to humor permits us to take a new look at “non-humorous” laughter, which seems mysterious when viewed statically. Possibly the “nervous” laughter caused by loss of self-control, embarrassment, ignorance, awkwardness, etc., (is it easy to distinguish it from laughter in the weight-judging experiments?) is not so much a special “defense mechanism,” as a phenomenon related to humorous laughter

– a sign of detachment from the self, of imaginary regression to the stage of infantile (or ancient) helplessness, when our store of common sense was small by today's standards. The same may concern "social" laughter, expressing not only joyful excitement, but also the atavistic crowding effect – the helplessness of each of us in the face of a spontaneous rush of collective emotion (see section 2.3 on emotional contagion).

Contemplation of one's own stupidity (and who else's; after all, we are all people) is an inexhaustible source of joy. At one time we all were more foolish than we are now – in our own childhood as well as in the childhood of our species. Absurdities, which children utter abundantly and seriously "from two to five,"⁶² captivate not only adoring parents. These utterances themselves or those quite similar to them, enter almost unchanged into adult humor and become its integral component. Suffice it to recall examples of pure comedy from Aristophanes to nonsense, to understand that the aesthetic component, being mixed in with absurdity and turning it into art, does not render it any less absurd.

There are no grounds for doubting the correctness of Eisenstein as well: to all appearances an equally integral component of the comic are the serious notions of our ancestors, unknown to us but preserved in our collective memory. Indeed, a genetic analysis of domestic folktales, specifically those of the joke type, reveals remnants of archaic beliefs reinterpreted in a parodic fashion (Propp, 1986, pp. 145-50; Meletinskii, 2005, pp. 199-200; Iudin, 2006, pp. 95-8, 106-12, 161, 164, 171, 176-80, etc.). But the humor of domestic folktales may also stem from the fact that in these stories, stratified society is viewed from the standpoint of egalitarian society and therefore appears absurd (Iudin, 2006, p. 72, 110, 151-2, 176, 204). Folktales about tricksters and fools "reproduce archaic mental schemes in a modern historical setting" (*ibid.*, p. 185). In other words, both mutually parodic views – top down and bottom up – may be present in the same texts. The relevance of these observations, which strikingly agree with Eisenstein's ideas, extends far beyond folklore studies; they bear on the universalia of the human mind.

Bergson (1911/1899, ch. I, pt. V) considered the cause for laughter to be "something mechanical encrusted on the living," "rigidity clashing with the inner suppleness of life," and a "human regulation of affairs usurping the place of the laws of nature." However broadly we may interpret this theory, it does not explain either the results of weight-judging experiments or laughter on the whole. Bergson's initial premise, his belief in man's freedom and suppleness is a Rousseauist illusion. Perhaps Mowgli and Tarzan conform to this ideal – but they were invented by

fantasists. Man's behavior in culture (in any culture!) is as unavoidably automatic as the instinctive behavior of animals, and man outside culture is not man. It is quite unnecessary to turn to grotesque comedies of the Industrial Age like Chaplin's *Modern Times* to understand that the main source of what Bergson called automatism and ascribed to separate individuals is culture at large – the collective property of the human species.

The duality of man, this unique animal adapted to culture, accounts for his ability to take a detached view of his situation from the standpoint of nature. From this position, culture appears to be a result of ludicrous conceit, something like a Tower of Babel project or a clown's attempts to imitate a strongman, acrobat, or magician. Each failure of such an attempt, each invalidation of human reason, skill, and worth is a potential cause for laughter. Thus, a man in a fur coat slipping on the stone stairs of the subway and sliding down the steps on his own rear can, for a moment, look like a doll or even a ball.⁶³ A Bergsonian would regard this as evidence of mechanism intruding in the behavior of an individual from who knows where. For a "detached view," however, this is one of the numberless and vivid examples of *Homo sapiens'* failed attempts to rise above nature and to construct an artificial world according to his own understanding.

Laughing at such cases and momentarily "degrading" our fellowman to the level not even of an animal but of a thing, we degrade ourselves. Our thoughtless laughter is not an expression of superiority or *schadenfreude*, as Hobbes believed, nor is it social retribution for absent-mindedness, as Bergson supposed. Looking at the situation from the metalevel, we do not rise above it, nor do we look at it from God's point of view, which has never been known to us. On the contrary, we descend from the level of fully acculturated beings to the level where culture still seemed foreign to our ancestors.

The quintessence of detachment from our collective self is circus clowning. In it the feeling of absurdity and unnaturalness of the condition in which man placed himself when he decided to set himself off from nature, attains its maximal reification, and the conflict between the actual actor and the inferior Other attains the *nec plus ultra*. The situation here is entirely different from that of a dramatic actor playing roles which may contrast with his self and yet be appropriate. The clown plays no role other than that of *Homo sapiens* playing a role which is inappropriate for him. The outlandish masks, grotesque outfits, absurd and useless things which the clown carries around, the chronic failures

that befall him at the slightest attempt to do or say something reasonable – all this cannot be considered anything but a self-parody of man as a cultural being. From time immemorial clowns have put on before us the same performance titled *Culture: A View From Outside*.

Whatever justifies the clowns' roles is transient and irrelevant. In archaic rituals they depicted the dead, who were supposed to do everything the wrong way around; in Christian mysteries, pathetic devils. Today they entertain children, but the questions they pose remain the same. Just who are we, after all? What sort of funny getup have we put on? What sort of junk have we piled up around ourselves? What are we trying to do and why? What are those funny sounds we utter? Why on earth do we think that such sounds can mean anything? And another thing, if it's not a secret, just what's the advantage of walking upright? Isn't all this behavior mechanical and artificial?

Hardly anyone of us has asked ourselves these "simian questions"; but any time we look at clowns and fall under the spell of laughter, the reason for which is obscure for us, we unconsciously contemplate our biocultural duality. This contemplation has become less collective than it was in the past; collective laughter, too, has almost disappeared. We have been divided into actors and spectators, but then the one who is laughing at someone else right now can himself become a target of laughter, or rather, offer a pretext for laughter the next moment.

Death, runs the proverb, always finds a cause for itself. One should add: so does laughter. Laughter and death – these two great levelers – show that "No man is an island, entire of itself; every man is a piece of the continent, a part of the main."⁶⁴ And therefore never send to know who they are laughing at; for they are always laughing at you. Or, in Gogol's words, "What are you laughing at? You're laughing at yourselves!"

Not infrequently, by the way, "targets" themselves laugh. People (particularly women and children) behave that way, for example, when they rush into a subway car just before the doors close. It would be strange to see in such laughter the expression of superiority, egotism, or ostracism. Man in this situation does not laugh at himself as a separate individual, just as in other situations he does not laugh at others as separate individuals. Laughter is single and its only subject is *Homo sapiens*, a dual biocultural being, collectivistic in the extreme. The only object of laughter is the same – *Homo sapiens*.

Speaking of the "self-conscious comic" peculiar to low comedy and farce, August Schlegel (1846/1809-11, p. 184) wrote that this type of the comic "always supposes a certain inward duality of character, and

the superior half, which rallies and laughs at the other, has in its tone and occupation a near affinity to the comic poet himself. He occasionally delivers over his functions entirely to this representative, allowing him studiously to overcharge the picture which he draws of himself, and to enter into a tacit understanding with the spectators, that he and they are to turn the other characters into ridicule.”

The idea of man’s inward duality is quite correct. We need only to free it from Hobbesianism because superiority – even over oneself – is incompatible with laughter. Indeed, Jean Paul viewed the same phenomenon in a different light, and yet again we marvel at his acumen: “The poet becomes to a certain extent what he ridicules; . . . for the burlesque poet describes and at the same time embodies low life; he is a siren who has a prettier half but who raises only the animal half above the surface of the sea” (Jean Paul, 1773/1804, p. 117). It remains for us to transfer the discussion from the individual level to that of the species, which Jean Paul and Schlegel were, of course, unable to do because they lived before Darwin.

The nouveaux riches are traditional heroes of comedies. Homo sapiens is an evolutionary nouveau riche. As long as he feels superiority, he does not laugh; on the contrary, as a nouveau riche is supposed to do, he blows himself up with “vain glory,” going all out to maintain his hard-won status. This requires total seriousness. Laughter comes with the recognition that superiority is illusory. Let’s put it straight – there are no strangers here: a bipedal speaking primate endowed with introspection sometimes seems funny to himself. With each step, and especially when falling, he betrays his plebeian genealogy (see Eisenstein, 1966/1934, pp. 483-8, for similar thoughts; see also Gervais and Wilson, 2005; for psychoanalysts laughter at someone else’s falling attests to ontogenetic regression to the stage when toddlers learn to walk). But the same duality allows us, like our remote ancestors, who practiced animism, to “lend,” in Jean Paul’s sense, human traits such as the desire to amuse us to natural – and any other – objects (see Eisenstein, 1966/1934, p. 524; 2002/1940-48, pp. 421-2, for examples from Disney’s animated cartoons).

Take all the instances of the “funny” listed in the preceding section. For Homo sapiens as a full-fledged cultural being, there is nothing funny about either trying to catch up with the hat blown off one’s own head or dropping a bag of eggs. Viewed from inside culture, these are but trifling failures, which in no way deflect man from his triumphant progress. At the most, they can annoy, but they can as well be ignored. Imagine, however, an ingenious primate who, having learned to walk

upright, decides to diversify his life by decorating himself with a hat or by collecting birds' eggs and carrying them in a bag with a view of eating them later! This, indeed, is where Bergson's notion of "artificiality" as the principal cause of laughter acquires a new and profound meaning. In this perspective, *Homo sapiens'* failures assume a truly evolutionary dimension, and ideas such as "human regulation of affairs usurping the place of the laws of nature," "the mechanical encrusted on the living," and "retribution for absent-mindedness" are seen in an entirely different light, of which Bergson himself did not suspect. Or again, think of our ancestors' childish logic demanding that animals should be "proportional," and that objects of the same size should have the same weight!

The story goes that the main, if not the only, duty of a certain employee was to date-stamp documents and that he did this year in, year out not without pleasure. When asked if he was bored, he answered, "Not at all; for there's a new date every day." Life in a prehistoric society was scarcely less routine, rather just the opposite; for there was no calendar, and time did not move forward, but in a circle. This existence can seem mechanical and funny only to someone who temporarily stops treating culture seriously and looks at it from the standpoint of nature. True, the behavior of animals is no less automatic than that of humans, but then doesn't the comic stem from the clash between two kinds of automatism – the natural and the cultural?⁶⁵

Thus, the emergence of humorous introspection and humorous metarelation does not mean a split of the personality into two opposing authorities, but the appearance, in addition to an integrated and serious personality, of its virtual nonserious double. This view may appear at odds with Kant's belief that the perception of humor marks the triumph of emotion over reason. True, but which emotion is implied? Kant explains that the rivalry is spurious, for neither reason nor feeling is attracted by the object. Pleasant emotion is evoked by a free play of sensations, for which the object provides only a pretext.

If we fail to understand this, we can confuse the serious hypostasis of personality with the Freudian super-ego, and the inferior Other with the Freudian id. And though I have written more than once that I find psychoanalytic theories of humor absurd, this has not prevented Sofia Agranovich and Sergei Berezin from imputing Freudian views to me (Agranovich and Berezin, 2005, p. 318).

I have to explain yet again what I have already discussed more than once. The id and the super-ego, as Freud depicts them, are two conflicting but likewise integral parts of the self. They are equally serious. Their

intentionality is the same, that is, they have the same object in the external world. They wage an unrelenting struggle for sway over the ego, for leadership in serious conduct. The id consists of repressed forbidden drives, aggressive and sexual, which allegedly find a legitimate outlet in jokes and witticisms, whose tendentious content is hidden behind an inoffensive comic façade (Freud, 1981/1905, pp. 140-61).⁶⁶ A neutralizing metarelation is out of the question here. Like the super-ego, the id knows perfectly well what it wants and, at least for the most part, never contradicts itself. As the Freudians assure us, no matter whether humor exploits salient topics (as it usually does) or nonsense, it is always based on serious drives and fears. Once a most innocent looking joke is subjected to captious analysis, a hidden theme, invariably filthy, turns up.

There is no absurdity to which psychoanalysts will not resort to defend their ideas. Freud (1981/1905, pp. 183, 194) was certain that authors of “tendentious” jokes (and, in his view, all jokes are tendentious) are people with sadistic propensities; their listeners, “co-haters and co-despisers”; and the narrators of indecent jokes, closeted exhibitionists.⁶⁷ Gershon Legman claimed that neurotics disseminate smutty and sick jokes to recover from neurosis by inflicting it upon their listeners, whose laughter is either a cry of suffering or a shout of joy because the torture is over (Legman, 1975, pp. 13-20). Legman’s follower and biographer Mikita Brottman (2004) tries to demonstrate that laughter is a pathological symptom of fear, aggressiveness, shame, and anxiety, and as soon as we get down to its purport, the desire to laugh vanishes altogether. Alan Dundes (1987, pp. 3-14, 51-4) seriously asserted that dead baby jokes express the desire to actually get rid of children, that elephant jokes express dislike for blacks (whom the elephants symbolize), etc.

The source of all this rubbish is obvious. The dismal and deadly seriousness of Freud and his disciples has precluded them from understanding what was clear to Kant: humor is “play with representations of the understanding, by which nothing is thought.” How gratification can, as Kant put it, “rise to the height of an affect, although we take no interest in the object,” is as inconceivable for Freudians as it is for all theorists from Hobbes to Bergson and from Marxists to sociobiologists, who regard laughter as an expression of *bellum omnium contra omnes*, social retribution, a weapon of satire, ostracism, etc.

Unlike the Freudian id, the inferior Other has no idea what he wants, and this is why he contradicts himself at every step. No wonder – the external world, either real or imaginary, does not exist for this zany figure. He builds his houses of cards from empty representations. Whatever

mask he puts on, whether a fool, a lunatic, a cynic, a psychopath, or a three-year old child aimlessly playing with words and concepts, he has no aspiration for leadership in serious conduct. While the tellers of sick jokes at times experience shame (after all, a representation, even an empty one, *was* a representation of something), they do not hide in the depths of their unconscious either sadistic drives or a desire to reduce the birth rate. By the same token, our joy at the thought that “An absent-minded man from Basseinaia street put on a skillet instead of his hat”⁶⁸ can be explained however you want, but not by the id’s having convinced us to disregard the arguments of the super-ego and to act the same way.

Contrary to Freud, the comic element is not a façade behind which a serious meaning is hidden, but just the opposite: the serious (or rather, pseudo-serious) meaning of humorous texts is a façade behind which nothing is concealed. Having mistaken the façade for the meaning, Freud claimed that censorship, external and internal, tries to tone down and mask the message of the joke. Actually, the reverse happens: thanks to artistic elaboration, the inappropriateness of the inferior Other’s message is accentuated and thus becomes parodic. Sick humor, with which Freud was apparently unfamiliar, judging by his preoccupation with relatively innocent innuendos, demonstrates this very clearly.⁶⁹ Nonsense, too, turns into parody and thereby becomes acceptable and attractive. Whatever is being parodied, however, and whatever constitutes the façade of the joke, is irrelevant to humor for the same reason the ostensible “meaning” of a parodic text is irrelevant to its true meaning. Humor is what lurks behind the façade. Were this otherwise, it would be incomprehensible why sick humor makes us laugh when its ostensible referents make us shudder (Kozintsev, 2009).

Baudrillard (1993, p. 230) was correct when he implied that Kant’s ideas of humor are more consistent and more radical than Freud’s because Kantian “nothing” is really “nothing.”⁷⁰ The humorous metarelation overtakes and disables the serious relation to the object whatever it is and wherever it is located – in the conscious or the unconscious. Previously, the argument revolved around whether non-tendentious humor exists, and certain theorists, following Freud, answered this question in the negative (Dundes, 1987; Gruner, 1997). Perhaps the time has come to ask whether tendentious humor exists. The relationship between humor and hostility will be discussed in chapter 4; at this point suffice it to say that what we take for tendentiousness is façade, even though most people perceive this only at the unconscious level.

The question of the unconscious is especially important and especially fraught with confusion because humor is unconscious. But for

Freud and his adherents the content of the unconscious is confined to ontogeny. The phylogeny of behavior, like our evolutionary history in general, does not concern Freudians at all, which is easy to understand; after all, this doctrine emerged in the age when ethology did not yet exist (still and all they should have paid attention to Darwin's works). The theory outlined in this book, by contrast, is based on the recognition of the direct relevance of evolutionary heritage for the understanding of laughter and humor (see chapter 2). Moreover, the leading role in the unconscious (that is, the main) component of laughter is played by innate rather than acquired factors. I hardly need to explain that, when speaking of the collective unconscious, we will not become Jungians, just as we will not become Freudians when speaking of the individual unconscious.

The important thing, however, is not from whence the unconscious component of humor stems (from ontogeny or phylogeny), but what it represents. According to Freud's teaching it is egotistic and antisocial tendencies separating people or uniting some people against others. According to the theory expounded in this book, it is the highly useful inborn predispositions that unite all people on the highest level – that of the species. Humor is no exception in this respect. In the same way, the six- or seven-year-old children's inborn and unconscious drive to make peace immediately after a conflict contradicts their culturally acquired and conscious egotistic motifs such as saving face (Butovskaya and Kozintsev, 1999).

All the above does not concern psychoanalysis alone. Any analysis of the "content" of jokes, whether from the standpoint of semantics, psychology, sociology, politics, ethnicity or whatever, proceeds from the assumption that jokes have a content, that is, that they are meaningful, even if non-bona fide, texts. Therefore the analysis necessarily focuses on the façade, which is a sine qua non of a modern "civilized" joke. The parodic nature of jokes – their rationale – remains generally unnoticed.

To regard seriousness as content (purpose), and humor as form ("façade," means), as many from Freudians to Marxists have done – is to neglect the antagonism of these two elements. Humor is never satisfied with the role of form and means; it seeks to become content and purpose, supplanting any seriousness. Hence the internal discord that is so typical of satirists. Satire is based on a serious – moral – motive. A person seeking to make fun of what appears evil to him/her tries to combine what can only alternate: a serious attitude to the object and a humorous

metarelation disabling this attitude. In other words, the satirist tries to attack seriously and in jest at the same time, which is clearly impossible. Therefore satire is intrinsically doomed to failure.

Gogol, whom we are accustomed to consider a satirist, observes in his metaplay *Leaving the Theatre*,⁷¹ that “even he who no longer fears anything else in the world fears ridicule,” and straight away acknowledges that laughter is “light and brings reconciliation to the soul.” The first dictum reflects the age-old human inability to distinguish on the conscious level the cultural façade of a joke from what is concealed behind it. The second judgment, clearly contradicting the first and evidencing the author’s insight, is the result of an intuitive penetration into the heart of laughter. The permanent oscillation between two opposing and incompatible points of view – the serious and the nonserious – is entirely normal, but an attempt to merge them is fraught with mental crisis.

What then is left for the subject to do when the serious attitude to the object is temporarily disabled? The answer, it would seem, is obvious: if the serious attitude is not replaced by an alternative attitude, then serious conduct cannot be replaced by an alternative conduct, unless one considers laughter an alternative. “Some say that Aristophanes took up writing *The Clouds* without feeling any enmity toward Socrates, having no real or fictitious reason for writing, and feeling no dislike toward him whatsoever,” – testifies a Greek scholiast (Iarkho, 2000, p. 900).

But the whole trouble is that other people consider laughter both an attitude and conduct, and it was about these people that Socrates spoke at his trial; whether he was right or not in adding Aristophanes to them is another question: “. . . For I have had many accusers, who accused me of old. . . . And, hardest of all, their names I do not know and cannot tell; unless in the chance of a comic poet” (Plato, *Apology*, 18 B-D⁷²).

Turgenev took the caricature of him in Dostoevskii’s *Demons* with the same bitterness. And although this quarrel is closer to us by more than two thousand years and the serious relationships of its participants are much more transparent to us, we still cannot decide whether the caricature was provoked by genuine hostility or merely by the Imp of the Perverse having interfered and causing the temporary anesthesia of the parodist’s heart. In fact, this was unclear to contemporaries and, apparently, even to the participants themselves (Budanova, 1987, pp. 70, 79, etc.). In any event, the two writers eventually reconciled (was it not because laughter – even unapprehended – “is light and brings reconciliation to the soul”?), whereas Socrates was not destined to be reconciled with Aristophanes.

What was it, then, that forced Gogol to contradict himself, speaking now about man’s helplessness in the face of ridicule, now about the conciliatory role of laughter? We won’t be able to understand this before we understand what laughter is.

Notes

1. The Greek word μίμησις is often translated literally, as “imitation” rather than more broadly as “representation.” In Butcher’s translation, the entire expression is rendered as “imitation of characters of a lower type” (Aristotle. *Poetics*. Trans. by S. H. Butcher. Mineola, NY: Dover Publications, 1997, p. 9).
2. Cited from *Aristotle in 23 Volumes*. Vol. 23, trans. by W. H. Fyfe. Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press, 1932 [*Trans. note*] <http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/cgi-bin/ptext?doc=Perseus%3Atext%3A1999.01.0056;query=section%3D%233;layout=;loc=1448a>; <http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/cgi-bin/ptext?doc=Perseus%3Atext%3A1999.01.0056;query=section%3D%235;layout=;loc=1449a>
3. Aristotle. *Nicomachean Ethics*. Aristotle in 23 Volumes, Vol. 19, trans. by H. Rackham. Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press; London, William Heinemann Ltd. 1934 [*Trans. note*]. <http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/cgi-bin/ptext?doc=Perseus%3Atext%3A1999.01.0054;query=bekker%20page%3D%2372;layout=;loc=1128b%201>
4. The term “humor” is used in this book in a rather broad ordinary sense, as in explanatory dictionaries. However, unlike most contemporary Western theorists, we will not classify as “humor” either irony, including sarcasm, or satire (these phenomena will be discussed separately). In the past the term “humor” was used in a narrower sense, often only with regard to a late European or even a specifically English literary tradition.
5. The most noticeable exceptions are the psychoanalysts, whose views we will discuss separately.
6. Miscommunication, that is, communication contrary to Grice’s conversational maxims, has been receiving more and more attention from cognitive linguists in recent years. Apart from humor and irony (“communicating to pretend”), miscommunication includes deception, seduction, equivocation (“pretending to communicate”), as well as theatrical play and computer-mediated communication (Anolli et al., 2001). As we see, the non-bona fide mode is by no means unique to humor.
7. Even earlier, G. K. Chesterton used the expressions “incongruous congruity,” and “aptitude of ineptitude” with reference to nonsense (Chesterton, 2000/1953, posthumous, p. 233).
8. The cartoon (1940) is by Charles Addams and appeared in the *New Yorker* magazine [*Trans. note*].
9. The term “metalevel,” like several other terms used in this book with the same Greek prefix (metarelation, metamotivation, metacommunication, metasemantics, metaplay, metasign, etc.) belongs to the group of logical and linguistic terms (“metatheory,” “metatext,” etc.) that denotes a second order mental construct, serving to describe and explain the original construct, that is, permitting us to look at the latter “from the outside.” Thus, if the level of a joke or cartoon is the level of a topsy-turvy world, bad taste, primitive logic, and, generally, faulty semantics and faulty cognition, this can be noticed only from the metalevel. The self-reflecting man views his perception and behavior from the metalevel. Self-reflection is necessary but not sufficient for humor.
10. This is well illustrated by our contradictory attitude toward obscenities, which, as Boris Uspenskii observed, are subject to absolute taboo and are not to be used even

- in metalinguistic utterances. The nasty and unruly Vovochka, hero of the Russian jokes, did not fail to exploit the comic potential of this relic of the archaic mind. To his teacher's remark, "There isn't such a word as 'ass-hole,'" he aptly objected, "How so? There is such a thing as an ass-hole, but there's no word for it?"
11. Some believe that Voloshinov's book, at least for the most part, was actually written by Bakhtin.
 12. The expression "particularized direct discourse" in the English translation is misleading, since the Russian adjective *oveschestvlennaia* literally means "objectified."
 13. This idea is in line with the findings of Martha Wolfenstein (1954, pp. 166-7), who conducted a psychoanalytic study of children's humor. She demonstrated the child's gradual dissociation from the imaginary subject of playful mischief in the course of development, that is, "the use of increasingly intricate devices to circumvent growing inhibition." As the child grows, it proceeds from coarse practical joking to elaborate verbal jokes. The developmental stages are as follows: (1) It is I who does it; (2) It is not I who does it; (3) It is not I who says it; and (4) It is not I who thinks it.
 14. The manuscript of one of Daniil Kharm's clandestine "children's tales," perfectly suitable in style for the journals for children to which he contributed, but telling (in much detail) of a small girl having been abducted by an old pedophile, is interrupted by the following metatext: "I wanted to write something filthy and I did. But I won't write more: it's too filthy." What sort of children's tale is it without a happy ending, though? And the imaginary little readers get what's due them at the level of the story's "local logic," while the actual adult readers about to start suspecting that the story might as well be taken at face value receive a splendid chance for shifting to the metalevel: "Then this nasty old man was whipped and put in prison, and little Lidochka was returned to her dad and mom." In terms of the basic properties of humor, the psychopathic accent, no matter whether it concerns only the implicit narrator or the author as well, is but one of the manifold pretexts for justifying the inappropriateness of a humorous text. Of course, speaking of a humorous intention is possible only when the author recognizes the inappropriateness of the implicit narrator's text and emphasizes it in a parodic manner.
 15. Attardo's term "intermediate implied author" is broader than the term "implicit narrator" since the former is applicable not only to verbal humor. The term "inferior Other," however, is even broader since it applies not only to art. The notion of Other, as used in this book, has nothing to do with Lacanian psychoanalysis, except that Lacan, like Bakhtin, on whose ideas much of my reasoning is based, was influenced by the philosophy of Hegel and Marx.
 16. In his analysis of Edgar Poe's *The System of Dr. Tarr and Professor Fethers*, Attardo (1994, p. 260) mentions "the reader's sense of superiority towards the narrator." Strangely, this idea has seldom if ever been applied to the analysis of jokes and cartoons.
 17. Tynianov (1977, p. 215) noted that Nikolai Karamzin's epitaph "Repose in peace, sweet dust, until the joyous morning" (one of the grotesque characters in *The Idiot* – Lebedev – supposedly ordered this to be inscribed on the tombstone he had set up on the "grave" of the leg that he had lost) was inscribed on Dostoevskii's mother's headstone.
 18. However strange it might appear that a mythical character (often zoömorphic) should transform into a real figure, this materialization agrees with the laws to which the archaic mind is subject (on behavioral parallels between tricksters, jesters, and fools, see Otto, 2001, pp. 38-41; Iudin, 2006, p. 199).

19. The title of Giseline Kuipers's book *Good Humor, Bad Taste* is suggestive in this respect (Kuipers, 2006).
20. The idea that in folk humor obscenities are equivalent to wisecracks and punchlines has been expressed repeatedly (Freud, 1981/1905, p. 144-5; Nikiforov, 1929, p. 124; Levinton, 2001, p. 233). If we transcend the bounds of verbal humor, we will discover that the punchline has had even more expressive antecedents. Thus, all the action of the Russian folk comedy *King Solomon* consists in the "marshal" summoned by the tsar turning his back to the latter and imitating a fart by means of calf bladders squeezed in his armpits, after which courtiers beat both him and the tsar (Berkov, 1953, p. 86). Granted, this may be a late echo of the carnivalesque dethronement of the king (Belkin, 1975, p. 155). But what then are American gags, which were popular right up to the twentieth century (some of them are based on the same stunt)? Although humor of this level sickens many of us, it would be hypocritical to assert that it is altogether alien to modern civilized people.
21. *The Fisher. A Resurrection Piece*. The Works of Lucian of Samosta. Translated by H. W. Fowler and F. G. Fowler. In Four Volumes. Oxford: The Clarendon Press. Volume I. <http://www.gutenberg.org/dirs/etext04/lcns110.txt>.
22. "Had I known of the actual horrors of the German concentration camps, I could not have made *The Great Dictator*; I could not have made fun of the homicidal insanity of the Nazis," Chaplin wrote later.
23. The same may apply to German jokes about Hitler (Dundes, 1987, pp. 25-6).
24. Pen name of Johann Paul Richter (1763-1825) [*Ed. note*].
25. Luís Vaz de Camões – Portuguese poet (1525 - 1579) *Pois em mim tenho a parte desejada*, from the sonnet "*Transforma-se o amador na cousa amada*," translation by Richard Zenith. [*Trans. note*].
26. This applies to interoception as well. The perception of stimuli originating inside the body presupposes a relation to the latter as part of reality that is external to the perceiving subject.
27. Chapter VIII of *The Ingenious Hidalgo Don Quixote of La Mancha* by Miguel de Cervantes Saavedra Translated by John Ormsby. http://www.online-literature.com/view.php/don_quixote/12?term=friston; accessed 19 November 2008 [*Trans. note*].
28. Chapter XXV.
29. This applies not only to sensory perception, but to thinking as well. The modus (act of thought), connecting the dictum (representation) with the thinking or speaking subject, is always implied (for modi and dicta see: Bally, 1965/1932, § 32; Graffi, 2001, p. 248). 'Two times two is four' presupposes '(I think/know/believe that) two times two is four.' This pertains to both the lie and irony, since by saying 'Two times two is five' and knowing that this is not so, the speaker is only concealing a negative modus ('I do not think that...'). A false or ironic utterance is no less serious than a truthful one; for it means exactly the same thing as it would mean if the speaker believed it (see Section 3.4). A nonserious utterance, by contrast, does not mean anything, which is why the question about belief or disbelief just as about the truth or falsehood of such an utterance is meaningless. "There is no truth in jokes," runs the proverb, but there is no lie in them either.
30. Holbein's illustrations may be seen at <http://oll.libertyfund.org/Images/Erasmus/Holbein.html>. Accessed 3 Dec 2008. [*Trans. note*].
31. One might argue that we don't impute any pretense to animals or children, whose unintentionally nonsensical behavior often amuses us. However, because laughter has been part of social play from the very beginning (see chapter 2), all contexts where only one of the participants behaves playfully are derivative with regard to the original context. Virtual social play obviously requires a virtual partner.

32. Marina Borodenko expresses similar ideas in her book on laughter (1995, pp. 26-7). She calls the comic an anti-sign, which denotes nothing and only destroys existing signs (see chapter 3.)
33. Specialists in ethnic humor have observed that so-called “anti-Semitic” jokes display little if any difference from those composed by Jews about themselves (Davies, 1990, p. 121; Gruner, 1997, p. 93). In other words, the relation between the subjects and those whom we believe to be the objects cannot be deduced from these stories.
34. The term “symbolic inversion” was introduced by Barbara Babcock to denote “any act of expressive behavior which inverts, contradicts, abrogates, or in some fashion presents an alternative to commonly held cultural codes, values, and norms be they linguistic, literary or artistic, religious or social and political.” (Babcock, 1978, p. 14). Babcock’s ideas were inspired by Victor Turner’s theory of structure and anti-structure (Turner, 1969), which in turn was influenced by Arnold van Gennep’s rites of passage theory.
35. Cf. the Buddhist *mu-nen* [*Trans. note*]. See also Austin, 2006, pp. 165-6, 504-6.
36. According to C. Lévi-Strauss, the mythological trickster plays precisely this role: he is the mediator between all categories (Lévi-Strauss, 1963, pp. 224-26). That is why the trickster, irrespective of all of his other possible roles, is first of all a comic character (Kozintsev, 2007b).
37. The word “Humor” did not exist in German of that time (soon after Kant Jean Paul borrowed it from English). Kant calls humor *Laune*, which could mean “eccentricity,” or “whimsicality”. A person possessing this sense is “eccentric,” or “whimsical” (*launisch*), and a humorist is “amusing” (*launicht*). If one disregards these old-fashioned terms, which assign a very peripheral role to humor, one must admit that Kant’s theory is amazingly insightful. It is true, however, that Kant, like Jean Paul, underestimated the originality of humor, placing it alongside music, games of chance, and other “charms that can gratify a dinner party.”
38. In the recent past, however, prominent theorists felt aversion to sick humor. In the words of M.C. Swabey, some of Edward Lear’s limericks and cartoons and certain passages from Lewis Carroll’s Alice Books evoked in the recipient “a sense of his veins turning to ice water.” She believed sick humor to be a symptom of “aesthetic confusion” (Swabey, 1970, pp. 14, 24). Aristotle might have disagreed. After all, he seemed to disagree with his own objectivist position when he wrote that “we enjoy looking at accurate likenesses of things which are themselves painful to see, obscene beasts, for instance, and corpses” because “there is the enjoyment people always get from representations” (Aristotle. *The Poetics* IV, 1448b. cited from <http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/cgi-bin/ptext?doc=Perseus%3Atext%3A1999.01.0056;query=section%20%23%24;layout=;loc=1449a>. Aristotle. *Aristotle in 23 Volumes*, Vol. 23, translated by W. H. Fyfe. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press; London: William Heinemann Ltd, 1932) [*Trans. note*].
39. If this idea sounds paradoxical, then the sign stating the result of the sappers’ work: “Checked, no mines” is also a paradox.
40. “Migrant plots,” as everyone is aware, know no geographic, historical, or genre boundaries. Thus, the plot of our joke about the Chukchi who watches his reindeer fall one after another off a cliff into the sea and says, “A tendency, I’ll be darned,” is borrowed, evidently, from *Innocents Abroad* by Mark Twain, where Judge Oliver, into whose underground house at first mules fall one after another and then a cow, says, “This thing is growing monotonous!” The “anti-Soviet” joke about people’s attitude to the authorities (“They pretend to pay us, and we pretend to work”) was told in almost the same form about a peasant (“We’ll pretend that we’re eating”)

- and his laborer (“We’ll pretend that we’re working”) (Barag et al., 1979, No.1560, according to the Arne-Thompson index).
41. Take, for example, the modern Russian joke about a Georgian (!) who was injured while trying to throw an old boomerang away (Shmeleva and Shmelev, 2002, p. 45). Of course, this was initially told about an Australian aborigine. The stupidity, whether real or feigned, of the author or narrator sometimes cannot be separated from the stupidity of the character; in fact the listener, who feels likewise duped, makes no attempts whatever to find out who he is laughing at. This is especially obvious when we laugh at children’s or folk jokes.
 42. One can recall Villon’s facetious quatrain on the topic of his impending death: “Je suis François, dont il me poise/Né de Paris emprés Pontoise/Et de la corde d’une toise/Sçaura mon col que mon cul poise.” “I am François which is my cross,/Born in Paris near Pontoise/From a fathom of rope my neck/Will learn the weight of my ass.” *The Poems of François Villon. New Edition. Translated with an introduction by Galway Kinnell.* University Press of New England, 1982, p 207. [Trans. note] and the equally flippant poem *Cancer’s A Funny Thing* by the prominent British biologist J. B. S. Haldane, where the physiological aspects of cancer of the rectum, from which he soon died, are described in an utterly irreverent Aristophanean manner (Haldane, 1973, pp. 235-6). Freud (1981/1905, pp. 293-301; 1928) used the term “humor” only with regard to such manifestations of courage and linked them to the defensive process, whereby the super-ego declares the ego’s sufferings unworthy of a serious attitude.
 43. Sergei Eisenstein’s contribution to semiotics has been subjected to an insightful analysis by V. V. Ivanov. But the theory of the comic turns out here to be but a particular aspect of the general theory of inversion of binary oppositions (Ivanov, 1976, pp. 104-18; 1977).
 44. Glimpses of madness are often evident both in the behavior and in the facial expressions of comedians (suffice it to recall Mr. Bean), which is due both to function and to tradition. Mental deficiency, as well as physical deformity, were especially valued in jesters since, according to archaic beliefs, these features played an apo-tropaic role, protecting the ruler from evil eye (Welsford, 1966/1935, p. 66; Otto, 2001, pp. 30-1; see: Kozintsev, 2002b [Mr. Bean, starring Rowan Atkinson, was a British television comedy series that ran 1990-96. Trans. note].
 45. “Caricatures of Louis-Philippe often depicted him with the head of a pear, perhaps because of a certain natural resemblance, but more likely because the slang meaning of “poire” is simpleton or bungler.” <http://www.library.hbs.edu/hc/cc/louisphilippe.html> accessed 30 November 2008. The caricatures can be seen at <http://www.easyart.fr/art-sur-toile/Charles-Philipon/Les-Poires-caricature-of-King-Louis-Philippe-302638.html> Accessed 30 November 2008 [Trans. note].
 46. “Why did W. H. Auden title sad poems with flippant titles?” a user of the *Yahoo! Answers* blog asked. The best answer chosen by the asker was this: “It sounds like he was satirising himself for his own seriousness and felt that it was criminal to mope for longer than one had to. It sounds like a good philosophy to have since sadness doesn’t endear you to others or cause anything useful to get done.” (<http://answers.yahoo.com/question/index?qid=20080120050328AAxDviQ>).
 47. At an earlier age children often confuse “funny” with “joyful” or “pleasant” (Herzfeld, Prager, 1930; Borodenko, 1995, pp. 48, 53).
 48. Each of us can, and is often inclined to, regress for a time, if only in our imagination. A child is able to laugh beginning from the time when it has already come a short way in its mental development, which permits the child in its imagination to revert to the preceding level. It is not by accident that laughter appears in children later than crying or smiling (see chapter 2). A child’s laughter is not simply a form

of reflection of its first achievements on the life path, as many psychologists believe in line with the “superiority theory.” Were this so, it would be incomprehensible why we, modern adults, display such a tumultuous exhilaration when reflecting on the difficulties which we overcame long ago in ontogeny and phylogeny and which have lost any relevance for us, for example, in contemplating someone else’s animality or incompetence in walking or in speech. If, however, our reaction is motivated not by superiority (is it a great privilege to sneer at someone who is infinitely lower than we?), but, on the contrary, by the pleasure from mental regression, then our laughter becomes understandable: the sharper the contrast, the stronger the effect.

49. The attentive reader, of course, has already caught me out – I myself have used the word “laughingstock” in speaking about the self-confident writer. This can’t be helped – I, too, am a naïve speaker.
50. Psychologists have recently found out that from three to fifteen percent of Europeans are afraid of ridicule. Willibald Ruch, following M. Titzze, has suggested calling this fear “gelotophobia” (Ruch and Proyer, 2008). In “cultures of shame” like the Japanese, the percentage of “gelotophobes” may be much higher.
51. Véra Fëdorovna Komissarzhevskaja (1864-1910). A dramatic actress who performed in plays by Chekhov, Ibsen, Gorki, Maeterlinck, among others [*Trans note*].
52. Linguistic intuition is a useful thing; however, ordinary word usage based on apparent obviousness should not become a barrier to science. Thus, the expression “sunrise” agrees with the norms of language, but does not force us to agree with the geocentric theory of the universe. As Pushkin said, “After all, every day the sun moves before us, / and yet, the stubborn Galileo is right.” [“Dvizhenie,” 1817. *Trans. note*].
53. Levon Abrahamian has told me about no less terrible contexts of laughter during the 1988 Leninakan (Gyumri) earthquake based on eyewitness accounts (I take this opportunity to express my gratitude to him not only for this, but also for his useful criticism). Darwin (1872, p. 200) noted that frontline soldiers experiencing utmost nervous tension are sometimes inclined to burst out into loud laughter at the slightest joke. Usually such laughter is called “nervous” or “hysterical.” The idea that laughter is a discharge of “nervous excitement” plays the central role in Spencer’s theory (Spencer, 1911/1863), which was supported by Freud (1981/1905, pp. 198-200) and by some modern psychologists (Berlyne, 1972). This theory is in some way reminiscent of Kant’s idea of “a strained expectation being suddenly reduced to nothing,” and is worthy of attention provided we discuss it from the standpoint of evolution rather than individual psychophysiology and relate laughter not to specific situations, but to the human condition as such. If so, “nervous excitement” becomes basically synonymous to seriousness. After all, laughter that can be labeled “nervous” or “hysterical” can hardly be regarded as normal. But even if we assume that it is normal, Apter’s theory relating humor to the shift from the telic state to the paratelic may provide an explanation even for such cases.
54. According to the late Izol’da Tsiperovich, whose dissertation is devoted to them, “*Tsa tsuan* [‘miscellanies’] are short, basically humorous, maxims or aphorisms about people, their conduct in society, their habits, weaknesses, vices, their emotions, sympathies or antipathies.” The earliest date from the ninth century; they are still being composed. [*Trans. note*].
55. Helmuth Plessner (1970, p. 96) cites a joke where this theoretical consideration leads to a practical conclusion: “What a throat!” a zoo visitor exclaims, looking at a giraffe, “Great for guzzling beer!” As Bergson supposed, the Negro is funny because he seems to be unwashed (Bergson, 1911/1900, chap. I, pt. V). Perhaps, uneducated Europeans of earlier times actually thought that way. One can cite

- “inferior people’s” dicta over and over again and find endless pleasure in them – the storehouse of folly is inexhaustible. Not only are the stupid ways incongruity can be resolved innumerable, but also the things a fool can find incongruous are uncountable. “How refreshing is a conversation with a complete fool,” Kafka wrote in his diary. The question is why we all, when in a nonserious mood, try so hard to regress. In particular, we adopt the child’s way of thinking. Thus, the imitation of forms, actions, and voices of animals provokes irrepressible laughter in young children (Hall, Allin, 1897, p. 15; see section 3.2). But the same stimulus often elicits laughter in adults as well, and this is a typical example of “comic regression.”
56. When mastering “adult” humor, children at first experience great difficulties in separating cognitive reactions from the affective. According to Françoise Bariaud, French children of seven years or so, having noticed the slightest hint at harm and suffering in a cartoon, often say “not funny” and ignore all other details. Only at 11-12 does a child at last understand what adults expect of it. Then it says, “It’s funny, because it’s not true, and if it were true it wouldn’t be funny” (Bariaud, 1983, pp. 171, 198; see section 3.3). This, of course, does not imply that young children lack a sense of humor. The basis of humor – the neutralizing metarelation to one’s own seriousness – appears very early in life and without any help from adults. But young children are not yet able to extend the sphere of comic imagination to all reality and to isolate it from sympathy and shame. This ability is what they acquire from adults.
 57. Nikolái Gavrilovich Chernyšévskii. (1828-1889). Author of the influential novel *What is to be Done?* Critic, philosopher, socialist, founder of the Narodnik movement [*Trans. note*].
 58. When a funny object is at variance with a serious one, the former is likely to win, involving the latter in its orbit. The buttered cat paradox (a mental experiment supposed to produce an anti-gravity effect) provides an example.
 59. Schopenhauer (1987/1844, p. 55) cites a similar example. Reason says that a tangent cannot touch a circle since at the point of contact they are parallel. A person, knowing this, but seeing this contact on a drawing, may smile. Any paradox, against which philosophers have broken their spears for centuries, may appear funny. To learn this by experience, one only needs to become stupid for a while. Imagine, for example, an animated cartoon about the race between Achilles and a turtle! [The imaginary film is based on the well-known aporia of Zeno of Elea. (*Trans. note*)].
 60. “Inborn memory,” or “collective memory” are but metaphors, of course. Rather than alluding to Jung’s archetypes, these notions merely imply that our innate psychic predispositions prompt us not only to act the way our ancestors did in similar situations, but also to feel and think the way they did. The amount of this “evolutionary psychic inertia” is yet to be measured. However, the fact that for more than 90 percent of his evolutionary history, *Homo sapiens* was a Paleolithic hunter-gatherer may provide a clue (see Barkow et al., 1992, for an outline of evolutionary psychology).
 61. The bottom-up view is brilliantly illustrated by Aristophanes’ comedies, especially by *The Clouds*, where the manifestly stupid “implicit author” expresses views that are clearly not those of the actual author.
 62. *From Two to Five* is the name of a book [1928] by Kornei Chukovsky that describes the inventive verbal behavior of children at those ages. An English-language translation appeared in 1963. [*Trans. note*].
 63. I thank Iuri Akopian for this example as well as for our long, vehement correspondence, which has been very useful for me.
 64. John Donne, *Meditation XVII* [*Trans. note*].

65. Igor Smirnov (2001, p. 285) in a short but profound article writes that the comic is the neutralization of *culture/nature* opposition. This view corresponds to what Lévi-Strauss wrote (1963, pp. 224-6) about the role of the trickster as a mediator between worlds. Of course, it is beyond the power of even the trickster to neutralize this opposition, which indeed underlies humor. This can be understood, however, not from the level of comic texts (where this theme more often than not is absent because the authors do not recognize it consciously) but only from the metalevel.
66. The facts do not support such an interpretation. Humor dealing with sex and aggression is valued not by those who “repress” these themes, but by those who see nothing wrong with them and behave accordingly (Byrne, 1956; Goldstein et al., 1972; Ruch, Hehl, 1988). This does not mean that when they tell jokes, they do not experience any conflict. But the conflict, evidently, lies not where Freudians look for it (see Martin, 2007, pp. 36-43, for a survey of experimental studies conducted to verify psychoanalytic theories).
67. Nina Savchenkova, a psychoanalyst and philosopher, to whom I am grateful for her comments and criticism, argued that such a recounting of Freud’s thoughts betrays my animus toward him. Suspecting that I had unconsciously and tendentiously distorted his views à la *Psychopathology of Everyday Life* I grew ashamed and peeped once more into *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious*. Alas, there it is printed just like this in black and white. Perhaps the unconscious tendentiousness of the editors, typesetters, and proofreaders is to blame?
68. The author quotes from Samuil Marshak’s 1928 poem *What an Absent-Minded Man* (*Vot kakói rasséiannyi*). The Russian reads: “Vot kakói rasséiannyi/S úlitsy Basséinoi!/Vméstó shápki na khodú/On nadél skovorodú.” “What an absent-minded man from Basseinaia Street! Without stopping, he put on a skillet instead of his hat.” Basseinaia Street (its present name is Nekrasov Street) is in Saint-Petersburg [*Trans. note*].
69. How could Gershon Legman, who, unlike Freud, was not merely familiar with sick humor, but was the world’s leading expert in this area, have possibly taken the “content” of these jokes at face value, is a mystery.
70. Freudians, however, have a retort for this, too. According to Martha Wolfenstein, Kant’s phrase about strained expectation reduced to nothing describes the reaction of a young boy who had discovered the difference between male and female anatomy (Wolfenstein, 1954, p. 220).
71. Full title: *Teatral’nyi raz’ezd posle predstavleniia novoy komedii* (“Leaving the Theatre after the Performance of a New Comedy.”) Published in 1842, it concerns the 19 April 1836 première of and reaction to Gogol’s comedy *Revizór* (*The Inspector General*) without ever once mentioning that work by name [*Trans. note*].
72. English translation cited from *Apology*. By Plato. Translated by Benjamin Jowett. [*Trans. note*]. <http://classics.mit.edu/Plato/apology.html>

2

The Origins

2.1 Humor, Laughter, and the Brain

A quarter of a century ago a good many anthropologists tended to attribute all conceivable binary oppositions inherent in culture to brain asymmetry. This tendency, which Sally Springer and George Deutsch in their famous book stigmatized as “dichotomania” (Springer, Deutsch, 1981), is still alive both in the U.S. and in Russia, as evidenced by works addressing my favorite isomorphism – that between the hypostases of the Trinity and the cerebral hemispheres, the role of the Holy Spirit being played by the corpus callosum (Merricks, 2004; Agranovich and Berezin, 2005, p. 144).

While the impressive achievements of neurophysiology over the last years have largely shattered the hope of revealing direct correspondences between neural and cultural phenomena, humor is so opposed to seriousness that it still appears tempting to link this oppositeness to some duality at the level of brain functions, specifically to language.

Back in the 1970s, when clinical data were the only source of information on the brain mechanisms of humor and laughter, Gardner, Brownell et al. found that damage to either cerebral hemisphere impairs humor perception, but the cognitive and the affective components are impaired in different ways (Gardner et al., 1975; Bihle et al., 1986; Brownell and Gardner, 1988; Brownell and Stringfellow, 2000; Gillikin and Derks, 1991). Right hemisphere damage prevents the patients from getting the joke. Such patients can be amazed and amused by any incongruity, and their cognitive reactions are completely dissociated from affective reactions. By contrast, patients with left hemisphere damage¹ get the joke, but neither amazement, pleasure nor laughter ensue (the reason

may be depression caused by aphasia); cognitive reactions are tightly linked to affective ones, and the patient takes everything in earnest. A similar picture is observed in schizophrenics, intactness of speech aside (Kuiper et al., 1998). Notably, an injury to each hemisphere results in a pattern that in some way parallels the behavior of preschoolers: a child in a flippant mood can giggle for no apparent reason, whereas when indisposed to laughter, it can take humor seriously.

Results of these works, which are based on the study of patients with severe brain injuries seem to provide a basis for far-reaching conclusions. The problem, however, is that the gravity of such disturbances makes it impossible to extrapolate these results to healthy individuals. Also, more recent studies based on more sensitive techniques have called earlier conclusions into question. While certain neural scientists believe that the right hemisphere plays a greater role in humor perception than the left (Coulson and Wu, 2005), others disagree (Zaidel et al., 2002; Wild et al., 2006; Rapp et al., 2008). Certain data suggest that the key role in humor perception is played by the right prefrontal cortex, where the two components of humor – cognitive and affective – are supposedly integrated (Shammi and Stuss, 1999; Goel and Dolan, 2001), but this disagrees with the results of other studies (Mobbs et al., 2005). Surgical separation of the hemispheres produces only a minor effect on the sense of humor (Zaidel et al., 2002).

Generally, recent studies based on techniques such as functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI) and positron emission tomography (PET), which provide an opportunity to study the brain functioning *in vivo*, have led to a radical revision of previous conclusions, which appeared so well-founded. Various authors propose very different descriptions of the brain mechanisms of laughter and humor, frequently challenging the results of their colleagues. I will mention certain recently published studies.

Not surprisingly, the understanding of visual humor recruits the visual areas, whereas verbal humor recruits those related to language (Watson et al., 2007). But even when only cartoons are viewed (thus the language areas are excluded), the activation pattern is rather complex, involving both right and left cortical areas (Bartolo et al., 2006). The effect of verbal humor varies according to joke types. Goel and Dolan (2001) found that referential jokes and verbal jokes (puns) activate various regions of the cortex. In the former case, the right temporal lobe (the region responsible for understanding a coherent text) is involved, whereas in the latter case the language areas of the left hemisphere are

activated. Laughter and the perception of funniness correlate with the activation of the medio-ventral part of the prefrontal cortex, known as the central reward system. No single area appears to be responsible for “humor in general”; moreover, none of the zones mentioned is specific to humor perception.

Moran et al. (2004) demonstrated that humor detection (“getting the joke”) activates the left inferior frontal and the posterior temporal cortical areas, whereas humor appreciation correlates with the activity of the emotion-related areas such as the insular cortex and the amygdala (see Wild et al., 2006; Bartolo et al., 2006; Watson et al., 2007, for similar results). Again, no difference between the cognitive aspect of humor and solving logical problems, on the one hand, and between the affective component of humor and the pleasure derived from other stimuli, on the other hand, has been found. The connection between these two components remains a mystery.

Mobbs et al. (2003) found that the perception of humor modulates activity in several regions of the left cortex, as well as in structures constituting the “mesolimbic dopaminergic reward system” (left amygdala, ventral tegmentum, parts of thalamus and hypothalamus). The key role in this system (and in the affective component of humor) belongs to the nucleus accumbens and amygdala. All these parts are activated not only during humor perception, but also in response to various pleasant stimuli from money to beautiful faces. This system, because of neuromediators, accounts for the drug-produced euphoria (Bergson and Freud had good reason to compare humor with alcohol). The same structures are responsible for pleasure elicited by humor. Thus, yet again, no specificity of humor compared to other stimuli was detected.

Wild et al. (2006) and Rapp et al. (2008) speak of three components in humor perception. One component is the previously neglected readiness to be amused (it is related to the activation of the right inferior parietal lobule); the second component is getting the joke (this factor recruits areas responsible for the understanding of texts); and the third one is the emotional reaction (exhilaration), which involves the limbic “reward system” of the brain. How these components merge into a single phenomenon, is a mystery.

As to individual differences, Mobbs et al. (2005) found that extravert and introvert individuals differ in brain activation during humor perception. Sex-specific differences, too, have been detected. Azim et al. (2005) discovered that in females, the left prefrontal cortex is more activated during humor perception than in males, pointing to a greater

role of the verbal component (this may be due to a greater role of the left hemisphere in female speech). In females, the right nucleus accumbens is more engaged in humor perception than in males, so women probably enjoy humor more than men do. But because the “reward system” reacts only to unexpected pleasures, the result may be due to women’s greater susceptibility to unexpectedness in humor.

The conclusions that can be drawn from the results of all these studies are rather modest; the more so because the data published by various authors are divergent and difficult to integrate. As Wild et al. (2003, p. 2134) admit, “[I]t must be stated frankly that at the present time the description of the neural correlates of laughter and humor remains fragmentary.... [I]t is clear that we are exploring the edge of a large and fascinating territory.” None of the publications cited above provides a clue as to the nature of the connection between the cognitive and the affective components of humor. Nor do these studies enable us to understand the specificity of humor in either of these aspects as compared to other stimuli. The question of why humor makes people laugh remains as puzzling as it was before the emergence of modern neuroscience.

If, however, we turn from humor to laughter, the situation appears easier to interpret. The most important study is that by Barbara Wild et al. (2003). Having assembled all the available data, the authors concluded that laughter is controlled by two partly independent systems. The first one, responsible for involuntary laughter, includes only subcortical (i.e., evolutionally early) structures – the amygdala, the thalamus, the hypothalamus, and the subthalamus, as well as the dorsal part of the stem. The second system, responsible for voluntary (feigned) laughter, is a pathway leading from the premotor frontal cortex via the motor cortex and the pyramidal tract to the ventral part of the stem. The work of both systems is coordinated by a special center in the upper dorsal part of the pons. The connection between laughter and humor perception is quite obscure. Also, it is unclear if laughter elicited by humor is triggered by the same mechanism as that elicited by tickling.

The conclusion of primary importance for us is that spontaneous laughter is controlled only by the subcortical and deeper structures of the brain. By contrast, the role of the neocortex, the frontal cortex in particular, as Wild et al. believe, is to inhibit involuntary laughter (see Wild et al., 2006, for a direct confirmation of this conclusion). Involuntary laughter, then, is caused by the disinhibition of the evolutionally early parts of the brain. Wild et al. (2003) cite the observation made by

the pioneer neurologist William Gowers back in 1887: “[T]he will is needed not to effect [laughter] but to restrain it.”

The leading modern neural scientist Terrence Deacon reached the same conclusion (Deacon, 1992, 1997, pp. 245-6, 421). According to Deacon, laughter puts the vocal apparatus under the control of the automatic subcortical behavioral program. As a result, voluntary control becomes impossible, and speech gets blocked. The incompatibility of laughter with speech has been demonstrated by ethological observations as well (Provine, 2000, pp. 36-9). In both its neural mechanism and acoustics, laughter is qualitatively distinct from speech. Specifically, contrary to an earlier belief, articulation is completely absent in laughter. As the acoustical analysis demonstrated, laughter consists of neutral sounds and contains no vowels or consonants (Bachorowski et al., 2001). Phonological renditions such as “ha-ha,” “ho-ho,” and similar interjections result from the unsuccessful attempts by language to extend its influence over laughter (see section 4.1). Being antagonistic to language, laughter competes with it for control over the vocal apparatus. This conclusion is highly relevant for understanding the function of laughter. Now let us turn to laughter-eliciting stimuli.

2.2 From Tickling to Humor

St. Augustine, describing an incursion into someone’s orchard (a trespass he had committed many years before in the company of other boys), wrote: “I did not desire to enjoy what I stole, but only the theft and the sin itself. . . . We laughed, because our hearts were tickled at the thought of deceiving the owners, who had no idea of what we were doing. . . . Is it that no one readily laughs alone?” (*Confessions*, Book II, ch. IV: 9; IX:17, trans. by A. C. Outler).

Fifteen centuries later, Darwin (1872, p. 201) used the same metaphor: “The imagination is sometimes said to be tickled by a ludicrous idea; and this so-called tickling of the mind is curiously analogous with that of the body.” McDougall (1931, p. 395) called laughter on being tickled “the most primitive form of humor.”

The bodily reaction, then, is related to a certain psychological phenomenon. As Augustine’s description shows, this phenomenon concerns not only “humorous” laughter, but other varieties as well, including what the psychologists call “nervous” or “social” laughter. The connection between these varieties is still obscure, and their relationship with the bodily response is quite enigmatic. The solution of this enigma may provide a clue to the connection between laughter and humor.

Laughter from being tickled was compared with the Rosetta stone, because tickling elicits laughter in humans and apes alike, and therefore, like a bilingual inscription, may provide a clue to the “decipherment” of laughter and humor (Provine, 1996; 2000, p. 99). This variety of laughter was also called “the cue to the true theory, and the touchstone which may be applied to all theories” (McDougall, 1931, p. 395), and “a crucial test for theories of humor” (Weisfeld, 1993, p. 151). Most theories do not pass this test. Being unable to encompass this kind of laughter, they simply leave it out of account as a primitive physiological response.

Laughter occupies a peculiar place on the interface between biology and culture. While its cultural aspect arouses the greatest interest, its original function must be sought in the precultural past. If, as we believe, involuntary laughter is a single phenomenon rather than an amalgam of unrelated phenomena, only a monistic biocultural theory can explain it. Such a theory cannot be developed if the biology of laughter is reduced to physiology. Certain writers even mention the “biology of humor,” but again, mostly physiology is implied (Fry, 1994). By doing so, we not merely sever humor from its true biological roots but make it incomprehensible in the cultural context.

James Beattie (1776, p. 328) was the first to formulate the dualistic theory of laughter. In his opinion, there are two qualitatively different kinds of laughter: “animal” (caused by tickling and joy) and “sentimental” (caused by ideas). A similar distinction is made by certain modern theorists. Thus, Karassev (1996, pp. 18-22, 27) distinguishes “bodily laughter” from “mental laughter.” The former, in his opinion, is related to joy, whereas the latter is related to the comic. As we see, the term “bodily” here is used metaphorically, whereas “bodily laughter” in the direct sense is apparently considered a purely physiological phenomenon unworthy of mention in the philosophical context.

Nothing, however, indicates that laughter is substantially different in both cases. A special study (the only one to date), undertaken by world’s leading expert in tickling Christine Harris, revealed only minor differences (Harris and Alvarado, 2005). Tickling elicited the so-called “Duchenne smile,” which is believed to be the key indicator of pleasure,² in 24 percent of cases, whereas humor elicited such a smile in 40 percent of cases. Also, contrary to this objective indicator, some subjects reported that they had found tickling unpleasant; sometimes they had even displayed facial expressions of pain and disgust. No wonder: the subjects were adults, and they were tickled by a stranger. An off-color joke, too, sometimes elicited a similar reaction since, as the philosophers

of the past would say, “what is liked in sensation can be disliked in evaluation.” Harris does not mention any acoustic differences in laughter from different stimuli.

Regrettably, neither the subjects’ sensations nor their evaluations have a direct bearing on the problem. No matter whether the listeners to jokes and those being tickled experience pleasure, shame or whatever, their feelings are based on their interpretation of the context. But how can they possibly interpret it without any knowledge of the facts? At best, they can speculate. The phenomena which we are discussing are absolutely enigmatic for specialists, let alone lay people.

In sum, nothing indicates that tickling and humor elicit two different kinds of laughter. If so, does the outward resemblance between “animal laughter” and “sentimental laughter” imply a deeper connection? And, if it does, what can laughter evoked by tickling tell us about the origin of humor?

The former question has often been answered in the negative (see Keith-Spiegel, 1972, and Morreall, 1987b, for reviews of old theories). Many writers believe that tickling is irrelevant to humor. Strangely, the dualistic theory of laughter is advocated by Harris and Alvarado – apparently not because of their findings, but because of their inability to give these findings an adequate interpretation. “[T]icklish smiling need have no closer a connection to mirth and merriment,” they write, “than crying when cutting onions has to sorrow and sadness” (Harris and Alvarado, 2005, p. 668). This sounds like a preconception, as Harris wrote the same thing before her last experiment: “Just as crying while cutting an onion has little in common with crying at a funeral, so the states associated with the two types of laughter may be fundamentally different” (Harris, 1999, p. 347). Tickling, according to this view, causes a nonhumorous “reflex laughter” in the same way as onion causes “reflex weeping.”

Two objections can be raised against this idea. First, in her earlier study Harris speaks of laughter, whereas in her later study she examines types of smiles. Confusing these two displays is hardly advisable. While forming a continuum in man, they differ both in their origin and in their functions (van Hooff, 1972; Butovskaya and Kozintsev, 2002; van Hooff and Preuschoft, 2003).³ Pleasure, according to the prevailing view, is indeed expressed by the Duchenne smile, although the relation may be more complex than previously believed (Fridlund, 1994, pp. 115-6; Ambadar et al., 2009). Although the Duchenne smile often appears in response to humorous stimuli (Ekman et al., 1990), and the transition between smiling and laughter may be gradual, this is not a

reason to conflate both phenomena. The term “Duchenne laughter” was introduced by Keltner and Bonanno (1997) to denote laughter combined with facial expression indicative of the Duchenne smile. However, they note that while both the Duchenne smile and “Duchenne laughter” can express a positive feeling, their functions are different: the former may signal the sudden reduction of fear and distress, whereas the latter may signal the sudden reduction of anger (see Tomkins, 1984, for the same conclusion).

According to Keltner and Bonanno, the belief that laughter can have multiple meanings results from the confusion of Duchenne and non-Duchenne laughter. The latter, in their view, is unrelated to positive emotion and can express aggression or punctuate conversation (cf., Provine, 1993). While it is useful to distinguish between involuntary smiling and involuntary laughter, on the one hand, and their volitional, feigned counterparts on the other, this must be done on the basis of objective criteria such as facial expression, not on the basis of stimuli. However, Gervais and Wilson, without using any such criteria, call laughter in humorous contexts “Duchenne laughter” and that in other contexts (for instance, in conversation), “non-Duchenne laughter” (Gervais and Wilson, 2005). The underlying logic (which agrees with lay logic) is plain: the normal response to humorous stimuli is genuine laughter; these stimuli are pleasant; pleasure is expressed by “Duchenne laughter”; therefore laughter in response to humorous stimuli is genuine, whereas that in other contexts is non-genuine, like the laughter feigned by bereaved people (Keltner and Bonanno, 1997). And, because only a minority of cases of everyday laughter is related to humorous stimuli (Provine, 2000, p. 43), it follows that in most cases laughter is non-genuine. This absurd conclusion is a necessary sequel to the belief that the principal function of laughter is to convey positive emotion, and that the distinction between “Duchenne” and “non-Duchenne” expressions is more important than that between laughter and smiling. Unfortunately, rather than focusing on laughter, Harris concentrated on pleasure, which, in the context of tickling, is of secondary importance.

The second objection to Harris’s view of ticklish laughter as a reflex is that the parallel with reflex weeping is misleading. In the latter case the secretion of tears is unaccompanied by either the vocalization or facial expression suggestive of true weeping, whereas in the former case both the vocalization and facial expression typical of laughter are present, and no arguments supporting the idea of a qualitative difference between ticklish laughter and humorous laughter have been advanced

so far. Nor have any psychological differences between these varieties been discovered. At the individual level, ticklishness was found to correlate with the propensity to laugh in response to psychological stimuli, making it possible to speak of the individual strength of the “laughter reflex” as a whole (Fridlund and Loftis 1990). As the later studies based on the fMRI technique have demonstrated, the anticipation of tickling (Carlsson et al., 2000) and the readiness to be amused (Rapp et al., 2008) correlate with the activation of the same part of the brain – the inferior parietal lobule.

Harris and Christenfeld (1997; see also Harris, 1999) showed that tickling did not make people more sensitive to humor, and humor did not make them more ticklish, so there was no “warm-up effect,” in contrast to the situation with joke telling (later jokes in a series often appear funnier than earlier ones). But the hypothesis of a single “laughing reflex” is based on between-individual, not within-individual correlations between “ticklish” and “humorous” laughter. Apparently, “warming-up” may be expected only when the stimuli are very close (after all, a joke is a joke). This is by no means the case with joke telling versus tickling.

As experimental data demonstrate, a feedback exists between the facial expression and activation of the autonomic nervous system (Levenson, 1994; Ekman and Keltner, 1997; Keltner and Ekman, 2004; Matsumoto et al., 2008); moreover, cortical activity and the emotional state accompanying it are associated with both (Ruch, 1995; Larsen et al., 2008; Ledoux and Phelps, 2008). In all cases the connection can be bi-directional (both afferent and efferent), which accounts for the causal loop. The nature of this connection is far from clear (Fridlund, 1994, pp. 169-84), and in certain studies no connection at all was found (Boiten, 1996). Generally, however, both alternative views of emotion can be true. On the one hand, St. Jerome and Darwin were right when they claimed that “the face is the mirror of the mind.” On the other hand, William James (2007/1890, pp. 449-54) had a reason to say that at least in some cases “emotion follows upon the bodily expression”. If so, it is unlikely that two qualitatively different kinds of involuntary laughter coexist within this dynamic nexus where all the elements are intertwined. Evidently, the dualistic theory of laughter is incorrect, and the difference between “sentimental laughter” and “animal laughter” is not critical. No matter how dissimilar their proximate causes might be, a single ultimate cause must exist. If we discover it, we will get a clue to all varieties of laughter, possibly excluding aberrant ones such as laughter elicited by the direct stimulation of the brain.

Several monistic theories of laughter have been suggested. While some of them proceed from the assumption that the common cause underlying the connection between tickling and humor must be sought at the individual physiological level, thereby reducing humor to tickling,⁴ others focus on social and evolutionary aspects, thus trying to elevate tickling to the level of humor. I will examine both approaches in turn and then suggest my own explanation. I will begin with monistic theories of the first group – those proceeding from the physiology of tickling.

David Hartley, the founder of associational psychology, claimed that “[l]aughter is a nascent cry, stopped of a sudden.”⁵ Tickling causes laughter because it is “a momentary pain and apprehension of pain, with an immediately succeeding removal of these, and their alternate recurrency,” and “[a]s children learn the use of language, they learn to laugh at sentences or stories, by which sudden alarming emotions and expectations are raised in them, and again dissipated instantaneously” (Hartley, 1834/1749, pp. 274-5). This idea apparently stems from Plato (Socrates in *Philebus* says that when we see a comedy, the soul experiences a mixture of pain and pleasure).

Kant (2007/1790, p. 162), whose theory of laughter bears an imprint of both Epicurean and especially Hartleian materialism, believed that pleasure derived from humor is corporal rather than mental: “[T]he jest must have something in it capable of momentarily deceiving us. Hence, when the semblance vanishes into nothing, the mind looks back in order to try it over again, and thus by a rapidly succeeding tension and relaxation it is thrown to and fro and put in oscillation.... It is readily intelligible how the sudden act above referred to, of shifting the mind now to one standpoint and now to the other, to enable it to contemplate its object, may involve a corresponding and reciprocal straining and slackening of the elastic parts of our viscera, which communicates itself to the diaphragm (and resembles that felt by ticklish people).”

These views were elaborated by Hecker (1873, pp. 76-83), who claimed that tickling causes an intermittent stimulation of the sympathetic nervous system and, owing to the activation of vasomotor nerves, reduces the inflow of blood to the brain. This adverse effect is allegedly counteracted by laughter: “The comic with its (physiologically demonstrable) effect on our emotions evokes the same organic changes as tickling.... The essence of comedy is an intermittent stimulus of the sympathetic nervous system, and rapid oscillation between pleasure and pain.”

The oscillation theory, then, focuses on the laughing individual, specifically, on his/her body. It regards tickling and humor as just two means,

direct (physical) and indirect (psychological), respectively, of eliciting the same physiological state. None of the three attempts at interpreting the outward manifestation of this state is supported by the available data on the physiology of laughter (see, e.g., Stearns, 1972; Fry, 1994). More importantly, the idea that tickling is but a physiological stimulus, and that “animal” and “sentimental” laughter are linked exclusively at the organismic level, disagrees with certain facts.

First, self-tickling does not normally evoke laughter. Unlike apes (Kellogg and Kellogg, 1967/1933, pp. 115-6; Goodall, 1986, record 7.1), humans laugh only when being tickled by others. This observation is attributed to Darwin (1872, pp. 201-2; see Sully, 1902, pp. 59), although seventy years before him, Jean Paul (1773/1804, p. 87) mentioned the same fact. Darwin believed that this is because the point to be tickled must be unknown to the ticklee. But later it was demonstrated that, when performed by a mechanical device, tickle was much more efficient if a person other than the subject controlled the device, although the point, time, and strength of touch were known to the subjects (Weiskrantz et al., 1971; see also Claxton, 1975). Even if the subjects believe that the tickling machine works automatically (which may be erroneous), the sensation is not reduced because, from habit, the pseudo-automatic partner is perceived as a real one (Harris and Christenfeld, 1999). If a person tickles his/her right hand with a robotic tickler while controlling it with the left hand, the sensation grows stronger and stronger as the robot's movements become less and less controllable by the joystick and thus more and more perceived as exteroceptive rather than proprioceptive (Blakemore et al., 1998). Two centuries earlier, these results were ingeniously predicted by Jean Paul (1773/1804, p. 87), who discussed tickling oneself with another person's finger while holding it in one's hand and letting it become more and more “independent” (it appears as though he had conducted the experiment himself). As magnetic resonance imaging of the brain suggests, the “nonself detector” is situated in the cerebellum (Blakemore et al. 1998).

Admittedly, the idea of “living automata” capable of tickling a human of their own free will may elicit laughter even without tickle. But one can make the “nonself detector” “believe” in the presence of a partner (and, accordingly, make the sensation more acute) even if one tickles one's own right foot with one's left hand and vice versa (Provine, 2000, p. 118). These sensory illusions suggest that the central mechanism responsible for the tickle sensation is “predisposed” to perceive tickling as being performed by another person.

Second, when the partner is present, the ticklee's response may be quite disproportional to physical stimulus. Not only can the lightest touches evoke a no less intense laughter than can intense stimulation, but, moreover, the same effect can be achieved without any physical contact, by merely demonstrating an intention to tickle (Dumont, 1890; Hall and Allin, 1897; Sully 1902, pp. 58, 64). It might be argued that this is a conditioned response. Indeed, in experiments where tickle was combined with a neutral conditional stimulus, the latter eventually began to elicit laughter by itself (Newman et al., 1993). But, as the above facts indicate, the presence of a partner belongs to the unconditional and not to the conditional stimulus, because without it, the response is much weaker or absent altogether.

Third, in order to laugh from being tickled, the recipient must be in a "ticklish" mood. As Darwin (1872, p. 201) observed, "a young child, if tickled by a strange man, would scream from fear." Indeed, whether the specific stimulus evokes fear or laughter in the child depends on cognitive factors. This applies not only to tickle, but to a variety of stimuli, which may elicit diametrically opposite responses in different contexts, as repeatedly demonstrated by psychologists (Rothbart, 1973). Thus, Sroufe and Wunsch (1972), who studied infants' responses to the experimenters' provocative actions, such as wearing a mask, tickling, etc., found that whether a child would react to these mild shocks by laughing or by crying depended on a number of factors, primarily on whether the experimenter was familiar to the child. They conclude that "context and stimulus may be inseparable." As the oft-cited anecdotal evidence demonstrates, tickle may be used as torture.

Fourth, to make the ticklee laugh, the tickler, too, must normally be in a playful mood and demonstrate this by laughing or at least smiling (Sully 1902, p. 178). The artificial and abnormal experimental situation where the subjects laughed while believing that they were being tickled by a robotic hand (Harris and Christenfeld, 1999) is an understandable exception. Because the subjects evidently felt secure enough, they reacted in the same way as they would have reacted to a "friendly tickler" (see above). In normal situations, which are less predictable, metacommunicative signals of friendliness are needed. Such signals, however, were hardly necessary for Leuba (1941) and his wife, who managed to elicit the first "ticklish" laughter in their infants even though they never associated tickling with play, laughter, or smiling (Leuba even hid his face behind a mask when tickling his son). If laughter from being tickled is a species-specific fixed action pattern rather than a reflex like a knee-jerk

(Provine, 2000, p. 120), then there should be no correlation between the strength of the stimulus and that of the response. Rather, responses will be of the all-or-none type (Harris, 1999). This may account for Leuba's findings. Being a parent may at least partly compensate for not being playful. All these quasi-exceptions notwithstanding, the *sine qua non* of ticklish laughter is that both partners cooperate in the interaction.

All this taken together strongly suggests that interpersonal rather than the physiological response to physical stimuli is the key factor accounting for laughter from being tickled (Sully, 1902, pp. 182-4; Dupréel, 1928; Koestler, 1964).

Now we will proceed to the monistic theories of the second group – those focusing on the social and evolutionary aspects of tickling and laughter.

The key concepts in the cognitivist approach to humor are cognitive mastery and insight. According to Berlyne (1972), an inverted-U relationship exists between arousal level and pleasure. Before insight, which enables us to get a joke or a cartoon, we derive pleasure from the increase in arousal; after insight, the rapid reduction of arousal is pleasant (Berlyne, 1972; see Apter, 1982, for the refutation of the idea of optimal arousal level). Shultz (1976) believes that the same sequence – rise of arousal followed by its drop caused by cognitive mastery and the resolution of incongruity – is present in games like tickling or peek-a-boo, which can thus be viewed as an ontogenetically early stage in the development of humor. The role of laughter in these theories is not clear, except that it is a peculiar expression of pleasure or relief.

Shultz's idea occupies an intermediate position between theories of the first and the second group. Being in some way similar to Hartley's theory, its advantage is that it tries to link tickling with humor at the psychological rather than physiological level. Also, it takes into account the social context of the tickling game. However, as it has been noted more than once, cognitive mastery is not a distinctive feature of humor: it is present in all problem-solving processes requiring psychological tension, which ceases after the problem has been solved (McGhee, 1979, pp. 13-7). Shultz's theory, like its precursors, focuses on ontogeny and individual reaction.

Certain sociobiologists try to reconstruct the phylogeny of humor. Alexander (1986) suggested that tickling had originated from social grooming. Earlier, Sully (1902, p. 181) had expressed the same idea, but only as an add-on to his principal hypothesis (see below). In Alexander's view, laughter (or the display and vocalization from which it evolved)

was originally an expression of pleasure, as Darwin (1872) believed, and, as a positive reinforcement for the partner, functioned “to keep the tickler tickling.” Later, laughter became associated with humor, which “alters the status of the humorist positively and that of the object or victim negatively.... Humor has developed as a form of ostracism.”

Before evaluating the assumptions on which Alexander’s theory is based, we note that it is illogical. How could an expression of mere pleasure have come to be connected with ostracism? Alexander admits that this is a paradox and that affiliative humor exists as well. But the latter plays no role in his scenario.

Dunbar (1997), too, tries to link laughter with grooming, without, however, mentioning tickling as an intermediate stage. He believes that the effect of humor upon man is the same as that of grooming (which he regards as a “low-intensity slightly painful activity”) upon other primates, namely, pleasure caused by the release of endorphins in the brain. Humor, then, is like “grooming at a distance.” Indeed, as the neural data demonstrate, humorous euphoria is basically similar to that caused by drugs as well as by other pleasant stimuli (Mobbs et al., 2005). However, the connection between laughter and the endorphin level has yet to be demonstrated (Provine, 2000, p. 202; Martin, 2007, p. 326). Pleasure is not specific either to humor or to laughter, and therefore Dunbar’s theory is no more plausible than that of Alexander. And, because grooming is supposed to be linked with humor solely at the individual (physiological) level, this is a just a modern version of the oscillation theory in an evolutionary disguise.

However, the attempt made by Owren and Bachorowski (2003) to extend the “pleasure theory” to the group level can hardly be regarded as a step forward. Based on their finding that laughter pleases the listeners more if it is melodic, regardless of the laugher’s psychological state (Bachorowski and Owren, 2003), they suggested that the function of laughter is not to express positive emotion, but to induce this emotion in others. This idea was supported by Gervais and Wilson (2005). Why this function has become especially important for man, and why humor and tickling should elicit positive emotion, is hard to grasp.

Another attempt at finding a link between tickling and humor was made by Weisfeld (1993). Like Alexander, he proceeds from the assumption that “laughter constitutes an evolved, rewarding emotional expression.... If it were especially important for the organism to receive a certain form of stimulation from others, then laughter might have evolved to reward those who provided this stimulation. One such form of stimulation

may be tickling”; and “laughter is a pleasant social signal that prompts the humorist to persist in providing this edifying stimulation.”

While compared with Alexander’s theory, Weisfeld’s theory is a step forward in that it neither derives the laughter-provoking tickle from grooming nor tries to link behavioral patterns as incompatible as tickle and ostracism, it is based on the same two assumptions: (a) tickling is pleasant stimulation, and (b) laughter was originally an expression of mere pleasure and a reward to the tickler (or humorist). As the ethological data demonstrate, both assumptions are erroneous. In a more recent article, Weisfeld suggested another interpretation (see below).

The idea that laughter evoked by the tickle is caused by pleasant sensations in the skin, and that tickling originated from grooming, apparently stems from the fact that the word “tickling” can refer to two very different forms of stimulation (Robinson, 1976/1892; Hall and Allin, 1897; Insabato, 1921; Harris, 1999; Selden, 2004; Harris and Alvarado, 2005). According to Insabato (1921), in some dialects, for instance, in Tuscan and Provençal, these varieties of tickling are normally denoted by different words, whereas languages such as Russian, English, French, and Italian usually make no such distinction. One form is light tickling, called *knismesis* by Hall and Allin. This is a series of gentle strokes or scratches directed along the skin. They are normally self-performed and cause a pleasant sensation similar to incipient itching that is immediately relieved. This may be done by someone else, but the presence of the partner is unnecessary since the activity has nothing to do with play. It is quite possible that *knismesis* is indeed related to grooming which, likewise, may be both self-performed and social. However, even if performed by another individual, *knismesis* does not evoke laughter in the recipient. In nonhuman primates, the social function of grooming is to appease or calm the partner (see, e.g., Butovskaya and Kozintsev, 1996a), and it is never accompanied by playful excitement or anything resembling laughter.

The second form of tickling – heavy tickling, or *gargalesis*, according to Hall and Allin – is quite different. It is always performed by a partner and should rather be described as playful poking or jabbing which has a diametrically opposite purpose: to excite the ticklee and initiate horseplay. This may be achieved by making the stimulation physically more intense, but other means can be used instead (as noted above, physical contact can even be avoided). What matters is the psychological intensity of interaction. The oft-cited fact that self-tickling is impossible refers only to *gargalesis*. Its most characteristic feature, provided that the playful interaction is really bilateral, is that both participants laugh.

Gargalesis was the form used by Harris in her last experiment. Obviously, she did not laugh when tickling the subjects; nor was she related to them, as Leuba was to his subjects (see above). Predictably, her results were controversial, and this, it appears, is the reason why she repeated the old idea that ticklish laughter is a reflex like “onion weeping” without even mentioning the ethological evidence.

Clearly, gargalesis has nothing to do with grooming. All the available evidence indicates that it is a form of rough-and-tumble play, or mock aggression (Sully, 1902, pp. 182-4; Robinson, 1976/1892). Indeed, monkeys and apes use the facial display from which laughter was shown to have originated – the so-called “play face,” or “relaxed-open-mouth display” – to communicate peaceful intentions during quasi-aggressive interactions (Bateson, 1955, 2000/1972; Bolwig, 1964; van Hooff, 1972; Preuschoft, 1995; van Hooff and Preuschoft, 2003). The meaning of the display, in Bateson’s words, is, “These actions in which we now engage do not denote what those actions for which they stand would denote” (Bateson, 2000/1972, p. 180).

A very similar display is used by mostly young animals such as dogs, bears, and seals in the same context (Aldis, 1975; Fagen, 1981; Bekoff and Allen, 1998). It is apparently a ritualized bite (Tinbergen, 1959; Bolwig, 1964)—one of the well-known instances of an initially aggressive signal transformed into a peaceful one by means of ritualization (Tinbergen, 1959; Lorenz, 1966). “The playful nip denotes the bite, but it does not denote what would be denoted by the bite” (Bateson, 2000/1972, p. 180). Or, in other words, “this is how I might deal with you; but I won’t deal with you that way.” If linguistic theories of humor, specifically the mention theory (see section 1.1), were applicable to animals, it could be said that the pretending individual literally *mentions* something that is not only different from, but also contrary to, the actual message. It is easy to see why in modern humans a sudden reduction of anger can be accompanied by the same ancient and unconscious play signal (Tomkins, 1984; Keltner and Bonanno, 1997).

Gargalesis, which also makes nonhuman primates laugh (Darwin, 1872, p. 201; Goodall, 2000, p. 190), is a reduced form of quasi-aggression – in Sully’s words, “a mild sort of pretense at clawing” (Sully 1902, p. 180).⁶ The same view was recently expressed by Weisfeld (2006) without reference to Sully’s work. Weisfeld was influenced by Jaak Panksepp’s ideas concerning the relationship between laughter and social play. As Panksepp has demonstrated, young rats respond to tickling with ultrasonic chirps, evidently homologous to laughter, and

the same vocalization is used by them without tickling, as a play signal (Panksepp and Burgdorf, 2003; Panksepp, 2005, 2007). Gargalesis as a form of mild playful aggression is especially typical of apes, specifically chimpanzees (Fagen, 1981, p. 109).

Human children, too, laugh in both situations: from 6 months onward, when being tickled or otherwise playfully stimulated (Sully, 1902, p. 170; Rothbart, 1973; Sroufe and Wunsch, 1972; Sroufe and Waters 1976), and from three years onward, during rough-and-tumble play (Blurton-Jones, 1967). In the latter case, as ethological observations demonstrate, the original function of laughter is the same as in nonhuman primates: to signal lack of aggressive intentions during mock aggression (*ibid.*). Only at that age does the true meaning of laughter become transparent. Its meaning in infants is enigmatic even for developmental psychologists, who suggest that the open-mouthed “play smile” in the context of intense playful interaction of infants with their mothers may express pleasure combined with a wish to suck their mother’s hand or nipple (Messinger et al., 1999).

While it is difficult to believe that the incipient laughter of toothless infants derives from a ritualized threat display, ontogeny abounds in cases where a function or a structure appears much earlier than it is needed. Indeed, the phylogenetic parallel was noticed long ago. According to Robinson’s unpublished observations quoted by Sully (1902, p. 180), about 10 percent of children aged two to four “pretended to bite when they were tickled, just as a puppy will do.” Only one obvious correction is needed: humans must be compared with other primates, not with dogs.

Robert Provine (2000, pp. 96-7, 124), who, like most other ethologists, derives laughter from the play signal of primates, focuses on its acoustic component. In his view, the sounds of laughter may have originated from the ritualized panting (usually vocalized) accompanying play fighting in apes. Evolutionary continuity in this case is less evident than in the case of facial display: according to Provine himself, the acoustic properties of the “protolaughter” of apes are very different from those of human laughter. Also, vocalization in apes normally occurs during both exhalation and inhalation due to the lack of voluntary control of breathing (Deacon, 1997, p. 419). Humans, unlike apes, can control their breathing, and only exhalation is voiced in both speech and laughter (Deacon, 1997, p. 419; Provine, 2000, pp. 77-85).

More recently, however, it was shown that the vocalizations emitted by nonhuman primates during play wrestling and tickling are more

similar to human laughter than previously believed (Vettin and Todt, 2005). Davila Ross et al. (2009) demonstrated that certain apes, specifically bonobos, can emit a human-type voiced laughter mostly based on exhalation, and that the laughter of common chimpanzees, too, differs from that of gorillas and even more so from that of orangutans by being acoustically more human-like. Therefore, evolutionary continuity in the acoustic properties of laughter, too, is beyond doubt.

Moreover, ape-type panting with both directions of airflow being voiced is a feature of children's play wrestling and might be regarded as an ontogenetic parallel to the phylogenetically early form of laughter—in fact, it does resemble the snicker (Butovskaya and Kozintsev, ethological study of six- to seven-year-old Kalmyk children, unpublished). As many of us can judge from experience, the mechanism of spontaneous laughter is more readily triggered not by imitating the final result, but by the same “prelude”—rapid panting with both breathing phases being vocalized, especially when accompanied by smiling. It is possible that the “acoustic” and the “visual” hypotheses of laughter origin are mutually complementary.

2.3 From Laughter to Humor

A naïve view of humor and laughter is that they are a tightly linked stimulus-response couple. Experimental studies have indeed demonstrated that the correlation between the experience of amusement (perceived funniness) and the occurrence of laughter and smiling is high (Ruch, 1995). Yet, when alone, one can regard certain stimuli as very funny without laughing. The same applies to conversation: utterances meeting all “objective” criteria of funniness often fail to elicit laughter in the listeners, who, nevertheless, appreciate them (Hay, 2001). In the past, many psychologists tended to believe that humor does not need laughter, and neither do humor researchers need to concentrate on laughter: “[I]f laughter were indeed an exact yardstick with which to measure humor experiences, we might have solved many of the riddles of humor long ago” (Keith-Spiegel, 1972, p. 17). Laughter, according to this view, is merely an indistinct reflection of the individual's emotional state. This interpretation is unavoidable if the relationship is examined outside its evolutionary and historical context. From that standpoint, one should focus on humor itself rather than on its reflection, which is so transient and unreliable. According to a modern psychological view, too, “humor may be viewed as a cognitive-linguistic form of play that elicits the emotion of mirth which, in turn, is typically expressed through laughter” (Martin, 2007, p. 156).

But if laughter is indeed only the third and last link in the causal chain, then why are we faced with such difficulties when trying to proceed from what seems to be the first link? Why should humor rather than any other stimulus except tickling elicit this specific emotion, and why should this emotion be expressed by laughter? Keith-Spiegel (1972), who had compiled the most complete digest of early theories exploring the connection between humor and laughter, stated that not a single one was satisfactory. She refrained from proposing her own theory, evidently believing that no interpretation can encompass all the boundless varieties of humor. According to the results of a survey conducted in 1976, this view was shared by many psychologists (McGhee, 1979, p. 42). But even today, the sequence of links in the presumed causal chain appears hardly less mysterious from the psychological standpoint, the only progress being that the enigmatic emotion supposedly elicited by humor has been given two quasi-scientific names – “exhilaration” (Ruch, 1993) and “mirth” (Martin, 2007, pp. 8-10, 155-6).

This is somewhat strange, given that neither theorists nor lay people in general nor even children from age seven to eight onward normally experience particular difficulties in explaining why they find a joke or a cartoon funny. Humor scholarship abounds in these explanations. Looking for the broadest generalization possible, one arrives at an informal conclusion, which, in this way or other, was made more than once (see, e.g., Bain, 1880; Sully, 1902; Propp 1965; Kozintsev and Butovskaya 1996; Veatch 1998). Specifically, the recipient of humor has some standards concerning “the way things should be,” whereas the humorist violates these standards in a playful and provocative manner. While a habit acquired through socialization demands that the recipient condemn the violation from the standpoint of whatever is violated (common sense, logic, morality, religion, aesthetics, etiquette, etc.), s/he rejects this demand, yields to the temptation to be led astray and, for a while, becomes the humorist’s partner and accomplice in a “legally illegal” negativistic play which Aristotle described as “the imitation of inferior people.”

The power of the temptation hinges on both aesthetic and social factors, specifically on the cooperation between the humorist and the recipient. If this condition is not met, then, according to Jean Paul (1973/1804, pp. 77-8), the subject, who is in a humorous mood, “invents” the idea that the entire world is a comedy in which everyone including him/herself participates. Humor, then, is a playful violation of internalized norms. The attribute of this play is laughter.

It is the last point that is a stumbling block. If we can't surmount it, all the preceding reasoning is futile. Indeed, whatever scholarly position we take, we must admit that eliciting laughter is the humorist's ultimate goal. However, to explain why a joke seems funny is by no means the same as to explain why it elicits laughter. The former question concerns the stimulus (and the explanation is always readily available), whereas the latter question concerns the recipient and presents the main puzzle. In the preceding section we have discussed several theories that tried to resolve it, and none of them proved satisfactory. However, their authors have taken the first step in the right direction by linking humor with a primitive laughter-provoking stimulus: tickling. Unfortunately, further steps led them astray. But the first step cannot be avoided, because it is logical to proceed from the bottom up, that is, from something as simple and primitive as tickling to something as complex and evolved as humor, not vice versa. To put the horse before the cart, Keith-Spiegel's dictum (see above) must be inverted as follows: If humor were indeed an easy and reliable means of understanding why people laugh, we might have solved the riddle of laughter long ago.

The traditional inverted view of the relationship between humor and laughter has at least two reasons. First, being an aesthetic (or quasi-aesthetic) phenomenon, humor appears incomparably more sublime and thus more worthy of attention than is laughter—a seemingly trivial physiological act often regarded as a reflex (hence the idea that it “reflects” humor). Second, the wrong view of causality stems from the tendency to regard humor and laughter in synchrony while disregarding both ontogeny and evolution. If, however, the actual course of events is considered, it turns out that laughter is in no way a reflection of humor. Rather, the opposite is true. In both ontogeny and phylogeny, laughter appears before humor. Laughter is a precultural signal with a strong inborn component. Humor, by contrast, is a cultural phenomenon that originated from a behavior that included, and still includes, this signal. In other words, as Jean Paul (1773/1804, p. 86) has put it, “laughers preceded the writers of comedy.”

Also, humor normally needs laughter. The primary function of comic art is to elicit laughter. People rarely laugh alone because laughter is extremely social. The absence of laughter despite perceived funniness is an understandable exception because an interpersonal phenomenon requires a social context. In conversation, the urge to laugh is often suppressed by morality or etiquette, but for a stand-up comedian or a clown, absence of laughter in the audience is an unambiguous sign of failure.

Laughter itself, by contrast, is quite possible without humor, at least when it is not restrained. In informal situations, the most common laughter-provoking stimuli are neither jokes nor puns but very primitive utterances which do not meet any “scientific” criteria of humor and appear funny only to the participants in a conversation and only in the context of this specific conversation (Provine, 2000, p. 40; Martin and Kuiper, 1999; Vettin and Todt, 2004; Kotthoff, 2006). When recorded, these utterances appear senseless and silly. Although acoustically, conversational laughter may differ from that elicited by humor (Vettin and Todt, 2004), this is no reason to regard conversational laughter as volitional and “non-Duchenne,” as Gervais and Wilson (2005) do.⁷ They call conversational laughter “a learned facsimile of Duchenne laughter,” and claim that it is emotionless and used for strategic purposes. With no lesser right could laughter elicited by jokes be called “volitional” and “strategic,” since no emotion is required in this case as well, whereas laughing is even more needed for reasons of etiquette. In short, subdividing laughter into types on the basis of stimuli appears unproductive.

According to Provine, who studied everyday laughter in 1,200 American adults (mostly college students), only 10 to 20 percent of laughter bouts might be regarded as reactions to humor, and even in these cases the level of humor is usually quite low. Moreover, in contrast to what happens on stage and in the audience, it is the speakers who laugh more (Provine, 2000, p. 43; Vettin and Todt, 2004). Laughter in such contexts is not a reaction to humor, but evidently a metacommunicative sign of nonseriousness, relieving the speaker of responsibility for whatever s/he says (Jefferson, 1979; Kotthoff, 2006). Conversational laughter may be no less intense than that evoked by jokes, puns, and cartoons. Quite similarly, the tickler’s lightest touches or even “symbolic tickle” without actual contact can elicit uproarious laughter. In fact, paradoxical as it may sound, if laughter is regarded as a conditioned response, then humor or anything remotely resembling it, like the tickler’s gesture, may be regarded as a conditional stimulus, a mere reminder of something.

As a result, we are in a catch-22 situation where we can neither separate humor from laughter (because humor needs laughter) nor tie both together (because laughter does not need humor). Provine (2000) focuses on the latter fact and concludes that we should cut this Gordian knot by studying laughter and humor as virtually independent phenomena. But this would again lead us nowhere, because we need laughter as a means of understanding humor.⁸ The fact that humor is just one of many laughter-eliciting stimuli may prove a clue rather than an obstacle.

What then does spontaneous laughter express? All attempts at giving a persuasive answer to this question have failed, firstly, because contexts and immediate causes of laughter are so diverse, and secondly, because most attempts are based on a purely synchronistic psychological or semantic approach. The answer is sought in the conscious or unconscious of modern man. The larger the number of partial explanations, the more an integral phenomenon is split into small bits, and the further away from a monistic theory we are.

It would be a relatively minor misfortune if only two kinds of laughter (“animal” and “sentimental”) were distinguished. But certain writers speak of many unrelated varieties, most of which are believed to have nothing to do with either tickling or humor. Traditionally, theorists have subdivided laughter into humorous (its connection with pleasure is the principal puzzle), social (allegedly caused by sheer agitation), jubilant (evidencing excessive vigor), laughter of relief (discharging pent-up nervous energy), that of shyness or anxiety (defense mechanism), and hysterical (either also defensive or a symptom of stress). All these varieties of “psychological laughter” are opposed to “physiological laughter” caused by nitrous oxide or tickling (see, e.g., Monro, 1951; Giles and Oxford, 1970; Propp, 1965; Morreall, 1983, pp. 55-8; Pfeifer, 1994), and all these taken together, to “pathological” laughter caused by mental illness or direct stimulation of the brain (Stearns, 1972; Black, 1982; Wild et al., 2003). Finally, all these kinds are separated from volitional laughter, including its ritual variety, which, like language, can express anything (Reinach, 1912).⁹ Clearly, spontaneous laughter cannot express everything. What, then, does it express? Is the question formulated correctly, after all?

William James (2007/1890, p. 449-54) inverted the causal relationship established by Darwin (1872) and suggested that an emotion is a mental reflection of bodily changes such as the activity of facial muscles, so rather than focusing on “the expression of the emotions,” one should think about the reasons why specific bodily changes occur. A century later, Robert Hinde (1985) reiterated James’s view. Indeed, “To a biologist, . . . the reason why an individual should announce its emotion to its conspecifics is not at all evident” (Preuschoft 1995, p. 201). Many ethologists believe that facial displays of animals are social signals. According to Hinde (1985), they are means of making some conditional proposal to the partner, something like “if you don’t bite me, I’ll groom you.”

Fridlund (1994, 1997) advocated the same idea about all human facial expressions. The fact that they are inborn and involuntary, as he believes,

explains why they often contradict the individual's conscious motives. Their evolved nature, sociality, and communicative function account for cases where diverse and loosely defined emotional states correspond to a single distinct display. Thus, whatever emotion might accompany crying in modern humans, initially this signal meant one thing: helplessness and a request for help. Sociality is even more evident in the case of laughter because modern cultural norms impose lesser restrictions on laughing than on crying. Therefore laughing in solitude is an exception, whereas solitary crying is not.

Crying, like laughter, is a fixed action pattern controlled by the automatic mechanism located in subcortical and deeper parts of the brain (Deacon, 1992, 1997, p. 419). Like laughter, crying is modified and inhibited by the neocortex. Because of cultural factors, the inhibition of crying in adults is much stronger than that of laughter. The custom of collective crying has disappeared rather recently (Reinach, 1912), although in the past crying was as contagious as laughter is at present (Hatfield et al., 1994; Deacon, 1997, p. 58; Provine, 2000, pp. 58, 132; see Kozintsev and Butovskaya, 1999, on the contagiousness and collectiveness of laughter, crying, and yawning).

The contagiousness of emotions is due to an ancient prelinguistic mechanism which synchronizes the emotional experiences of group members (Porshnev, 1974, pp. 299-300, 318, 321, 331; Hatfield et al., 1994) and is psychologically manifested as empathy. At the neural level, this mechanism is apparently based on "mirror neurons," the activity of which accounts for instantaneous unconscious mimicking (Stamenov and Gallese, 2002; Carr et al., 2003; Leslie et al., 2004). These long known "collective mimico-somatic reflexes" (Bekhterev, 2001/1921, pp. IX, 132, 217, 232, 251, etc.), underlie what psychologists in the past described as "regressive crowd phenomena" (Bailey, 1987, pp. 172, 250, etc.).

The contagiousness of laughter (Provine, 1992, 1996, 2000, pp. 45, 56, 129-32; Deacon, 1997, p. 58; Martin, 2007, pp. 128-31) engenders the illusion of the objective or relational quality of the comic. Were it not for the uniting force of laughter, subjectivistically minded theorists, myself included, would not have spent so much time trying to prove that the sense of humor, unlike all other senses "never resides in the object, but in the subject" (Jean-Paul, 1973/1804, p. 77), or rather in the subjects. Relationists, who disregard this fact, believe that the principal reason why comedies draw loud laughter from the audience is to be sought in the stimulus (see, e.g., Berger, 1995, p. 45). Actually, not only the proximity of laughing people (Chapman and Wright, 1976; Freedman

and Perlick, 1979; Brown et al., 1982), but even laugh tracks accompanying TV sitcoms tend to trigger contagious laughter in the audience (Provine, 2000, pp. 137-43; Martin, 2007, p. 129), and the fact is being unabashedly exploited by sitcom creators. Provine (2000, p. 142) had every reason to compare our everyday communication “punctuated” by laughter with an unending sitcom produced by a very ungifted writer.

Could we, then, abandon the traditional psychological standpoint for a while and adopt the ethological stance? Instead of asking what emotion laughter expresses (and being unable to answer it), we might ask two other questions: (1) why do we laugh? and (2) why has laughter evaded psychological interpretations for so many centuries? Before trying to answer these questions, we will briefly trace the path from laughter to humor in ontogeny. This has been done more than once (see, e.g., McGhee, 1979, pp. 52-6; Borodenko, 1995, pp. 38-59; Johnson and Mervis, 1997; Martin, 2007, pp. 229-67).

While it has been traditionally believed that laughter normally appears at the age of one to four months (about a month later than smiling), recent observations demonstrate that certain infants laugh already at the age of seventeen to twenty-six days (Kawakami et al., 2006). Laughter is most often a response to external stimuli, and this is an important distinction between the first laughter and the first smiling. The latter is normally “endogenous,” that is, caused by internal factors such as digestion. The first laughter is most often a reaction to a light tactile or auditory stimulation. Later, the key role is played by visual stimuli, and laughter becomes an important part of communication with adults.

At the age of six months, certain infants begin laughing from mild shocks such as peek-a-boo, tickling, pinching, and tossing them into the air. Stimulation in these games exceeds the level which was critical at an earlier age, and beyond which crying began. However, the greater sense of safety allows certain children to turn fear into pleasure. According to Herzfeld and Prager (1930), at the age of six to eight months, the “guck-guck” game (the German equivalent of peek-a-boo) evokes laughter only in 10 percent of children; by nine to eleven months the proportion rises to 30 percent, and by 1.5-2 years it attains 70 percent. By the age of two, then, the principal constituent of humor – the neutralizing metarelation (see section 1.2) – is already present.

The first glimpses of humor as an active behavior (or rather anti-behavior)¹⁰ appear at the beginning of the second year of life, simultaneously with what Piaget called “symbolic play,” and what evidences the appearance of imaginative thinking. Children of that age pretend to be

brushing their teeth with a finger or combing their hair with a pencil. They already know that “that’s not the way this should be done,” but if so, why not try? The role of passive objects or observers does not satisfy them anymore. Now they strive to create nonsense by themselves.

By the end of the second year, practical anti-behavior is supplemented by its verbal counterpart, and at the age of three, children begin playing with concepts. Intentionally saying what should not be said and drawing “the way it isn’t,” they laugh (see below). By the age of seven, the basic norms of morality and logic are mastered. No sooner does this happen than the drive for a playful violation of all these norms appears – and this, in effect, is none other than adult humor (McGhee, 1979, pp. 72-6).

2.4 Play-Challenge, or James Sully Redux

Unlike many theories which postulate a multiplicity of unrelated forms and causes of laughter, the theory that will be outlined below is monistic in that it is based on the idea of a single principle underlying all or nearly all varieties of laughter. The fundamentals of the theory were formulated by James Sully (1902), who was influenced by Louis Robinson’s ideas of tickling (Robinson, 1976/1892, and unpublished observations; see Sully, 1902, pp. 179-82). Attempting to trace the evolutionary sources of playful negativism, Robinson, who in turn was evidently influenced by Karl Groos’s evolutionary theory of play, interpreted tickling as “training for later and serious warfare.” Agreeing with him, Sully (1902, p. 182) wrote that “tickling is a variety of play developed by natural selection among combative animals,” and that laughter signals the lack of aggressive intentions. According to Sully, the basic principle underlying both mock aggression and humor is “play-challenge” (Sully, 1902, p. 203). Play-challenge, then, is a variety of anti-behavior (the latter can be magical rather than playful).

The adaptive meaning of play fighting remains a matter of debate (Power, 2000; Pellegrini and Smith, 2004). Certain writers, zoologists and developmental psychologists alike, continue to regard it as training for future combats (with regard to animals: Aldis, 1975; Fagen, 1981; with regard to children: Boulton and Smith, 1992). Others question this idea and note that play fighting has little in common with real fighting; specifically, the sequence of acts is quite different (Pellis and Pellis, 1998). The notion of “training” can, of course, be broadened: quasi-aggressive play may be useful for the acquisition of the ability to recognize the partner’s true intentions and to distinguish real social roles from play roles (Bekoff and Allen, 1998). But given the facts concerning the

transformation of aggressive signals into peaceful ones through ritualization, one might go a step further and make a claim which only appears paradoxical: play fighting is training for peace. Its adaptive function is to prevent real conflicts and maintain group integrity.

In any case, in light of ethological facts concerning nonhuman primates and human children, the original meaning of laughter as a metacommunicative signal of the nonseriousness of assault is beyond doubt. As Sully (1902, p. 183) asked, “[W]hat better sign of good-temper, of readiness to accept the attack as pure fun, could nature have invented than the laugh?” The only gap in Robinson’s and Sully’s hypotheses was lack of ethological evidence. To make up for that, Sully had to focus on the psychology of laughter (modern psychologists tend to do the same). Predictably, this did not improve the theory very much.

Alternative hypotheses, for example, that the basic function of laughter was to express pleasure or to induce positive emotion in others or that laughter can mean anything (the latter idea would oppose it to all other facial expressions) appear nonviable. Also, nothing indicates that laughter had originated from the mobbing behavior of primates, as Eibl-Eibesfeldt (1989, pp. 138, 315) suggested. Mobbing, a loud threat addressed by several animals to a common enemy, is a purely aggressive act, and its meaning is the polar opposite of rough-and-tumble play (see section 4.2).

The basic meaning of laughter as a metacommunicative sign, which implies that the subject him/herself violates the norm and deems the violation nonserious, appears to disagree with the traditional view of laughter as a reaction to an objective (“funny”) stimulus. The seeming contradiction results from the professionalization of humor. In professional or semiprofessional varieties of humor from comedy to joke telling, laughter must be suppressed by the performers. When this rule does not apply, as in everyday conversation, the joke tellers laugh even more than the listeners (see references above).

Evidently now we have a clue to the connection between tickling and humor – the two phenomena which coexist at present despite being miles apart in evolution. After the emergence of symbolic communication, two evolutionary steps had to be taken. Their order is not critical. One step was to supplement physical quasi-aggression by verbal and other forms of playful mock assault (backhanded insult). Bakhtin (1984/1965), with a remarkable insight (given his unfamiliarity with ethology), claimed that mock beating and other forms of informal and coarse bodily contact, as well as backhanded insult, which he termed “ambivalent praise-abuse,”

were the key features of carnivalesque behavior, where social hierarchy was reversed or abolished. Today we know that the same happens in primate social play. Bakhtin hardly suspected that carnival had biological roots.

Backhanded insult, being a sign of peacefulness by origin, can play such a constructive social role that it can even switch from an “anti-norm” into a strictly observed norm, as evidenced by institutionalized “joking relationships” between in-laws. Compulsory rude teasing without the right to take offense does precisely the opposite of what the hostile façade might imply: tension is decreased (Radcliffe-Brown, 1952; Apte, 1985, pp. 29-66).

Biocultural continuity in quasi-aggression is also traceable in the magic belief that thrashing and insults (of course, regulated in the ritual context) ward off evil powers, enhance fertility, etc. (Frazer, 1998/1922, pp. 663, 668-70, 690-9). Later in history, nature may turn the tables on culture: after the ritual quasi-motives have been forgotten, magic can revert to play. But then new cultural quasi-motives are invented, this time in a pseudo-scientific disguise. Hence, for example, the belief that lashing each other with bunches of twigs in the baths is a massage (however, as in the pre-scientific past, the procedure is accompanied by laughter). Cultural quasi-motives are immaterial since the original play drive is inborn and unconscious.

Ontogenetic parallels are no less distinct. Many children aged about four not just tease others, but, for no apparent reason, call them names, accompanying this by laughter (Wolfenstein, 1954, p. 161). These “jokes” are a direct continuation of physical quasi-aggression practiced at a younger age¹¹. The principal feature linking all these forms of quasi-aggression is laughter. According to Wolfenstein, as children grow older, crude practical jokes are replaced by more and more disguised forms of verbal quasi-abuse, which, in turn, give way to genres of “adult” humor such as jokes. This agrees with the conclusion made by Sully (1902, pp. 203, 205, 206, 356): humor develops from “make-believe unruliness” (“laughing rowdyism”) in infants to intellectual forms of “play-challenge” in adults.

There are interesting transitional cases of half-practical jokes where a verbal prelude is used to entrap the partner into an evolutionarily earlier form of mock assault very similar to that practiced by nonhuman primates. One such trap, used by American children, is “Adam and Eve and Pinch-me went to sea on a raft; Adam and Eve fell in—and who was left?” (Wolfenstein 1954, p. 115). Soviet children played the same trick,

but based on the fact that the nickname of the legendary Red Army commander Chapaev (Chapai) sounds similar to “*shchipai*,” the imperative form of the Russian verb meaning “to pinch” (more than half a century ago, the present writer learned this from experience). This is precisely what Eisenstein meant by saying that tickling is a wisecrack degraded to the lowest level. These words sounded like an elegant metaphor; who could imagine that they can be understood in the most literal sense? At some point in ontogeny and evolution, both varieties of quasi-aggression, one more advanced, the other more primitive, coincide, in full accord with the monistic theory of laughter.¹²

Here is a pre-revolutionary Russian prank, based on the same principle, but involving a form of quasi-aggression more radical than pinching or tickling. One boy said to another: “Whatever I say, you say ‘How?’” “All right.” “A woman went to a tavern.” “How?” “She got drunk.” “How?” “She returned home.” “How?” “Her husband began beating her.” “How?” “Like this!” (a punch in the back follows) (Vinogradov, 1998/1925, p. 709; see pp. 681-2, for other examples).

Here is a Yakut prank. “What’s the Yakut for ‘reindeer’?” one boy asked another with an air of innocence. “*Taba*,” his partner replied. “And ‘bull’?” “*Ohus*.” “Oh, you said ‘*Taba ohus!*’” (“hit precisely”), the pretended ignoramus exclaimed and struck the absentminded translator, who had forgotten about the surprises that homoforms can spring on us.¹³ There is every reason to suspect that similar “wisecracks degraded to the lowest level” are practiced in children’s subcultures worldwide and can be viewed as relics (or rather models) of the evolutionarily early forms of humor.

Likewise, British folk etymology turned an Italian nickname Pulcinella (from Latin *pullicenus*, “chicken”) into an English sobriquet Punch, the meaning of which was transparent for Judy as well as for the audience. Actual aggression at the level of the puppet show is but quasi-aggression at the metalevel – something that is “mentioned” or “enacted” (see section 1.1). Bakhtin (1984/1965, pp. 458-61) wrote about carnivalesque nicknames alluding to physical or verbal abuse. They have no common source apart from the fact that “annoying habits, even amounting to a love of physical violence, are not to be resented when springing from excess of the joy of life” (Disher, 1985/1925, p. 100).

The learned reader may object that children’s or folk pranks, let alone quasi-insults, are primitive and far below the civilized varieties of humor. Fair enough! Indeed, utterances like “Well done, Pushkin, well done, you son of a bitch!” (as the reader surely knows, the poet addressed this to

himself) or Gogol's "Damn you, steppes, how beautiful you are!" [from *Dead Souls*] are, at best, peripheral to modern humor, whereas clichés such as *Break a leg!* or Russian *Ni pukha, ni pera!* (literally, '[May you bag] neither fur nor feathers')¹⁴ are not funny at all. Their former magic meaning, too, is no longer remembered. However, their friendly message is easily seen behind the quasi-aggressive façade. The parallel to the social play of primates, which is pleasant for both the "aggressor" and the "victim" (Aldis, 1975, pp. 26-8), is apparent.

Herein, it appears, lies the source of the "inherent pleasurable-ness of obscenity" (Cornford, 1914, p. 49) and of the "'damn' theory of laughter" (Gregory, 1924, p. 191). Bakhtin (1984/1965, p. 28) wrote that profane oaths "are completely isolated in the system of meaning and values of modern languages and in the modern picture of the world; they are fragments of an alien language in which certain things could be said in the past but which at present conveys nothing but senseless abuse. However, it would be absurd and hypocritical to deny the attraction which these expressions still exercise even when they are without erotic connotation. A vague memory of the past carnival liberties and carnival truth still slumbers in these modern forms of abuse. The problem of their irrepressible linguistic vitality has as yet not been seriously posed" (see Jay, 1999, pp. 12, 26, 33, 37, 41, etc., for neurological data suggesting, in full accord with Bakhtin's ideas, that profane clichés are indeed remnants of an ancient communication system).

Another step that had to be taken on the evolutionary path to humor was to extend the principle of mock violation to all behavior, by supplementing quasi-aggression with other forms of playful anti-behavior. This, at first sight, is possible only after a symbolically encoded system of norms and taboos (i.e., culture), has been instituted and internalized. However, apes sometimes make a play face outside quasi-aggressive contexts, specifically, during acrobatics and object play, mostly when conspecifics are close by (Preuschoft, 1995, p. 203). Young children laugh when being thrown up into the air by parents; older children, too, laugh during motor play, but, like apes, they do it mostly when someone is around (Aldis, 1975, pp. 228-32, 239-41).

An "improper" handling of one's own body and objects (note that laughter ceases when acrobatics becomes a "proper" physical exercise) is easily supplemented by an improper handling of words and ideas. As soon as children have learned their first words, they find much fun in incorrectly labeling people and objects on purpose, and no sooner do they begin to master grammar than they start joyfully generating

nonsense (McGhee, 1979, pp. 68-72). At the end of his second year, an English boy babbles, “gee-gee fy air” (Sully, 1902, pp. 217). At the same age, Chukovsky’s daughter announced what in English might sound as “Daddy, ‘oggie – miaow!” (Chukovsky, 1963, p. 601). The level of humor here is about the same as that demonstrated by apes who have mastered a symbolic code (McGhee, 1979, pp. 110-20; Provine, 2000, pp. 94-5; Gamble, 2001). At six, a child can already draw whatever it finds amusing. The first cartoons depict a tree with eyes, a man with branches instead of arms, a red goose, etc. (Herzfeld and Prager, 1930; Butovskaya and Dorfman, 2004).

In both phylogeny and ontogeny, then, humor has two sources: (1) quasi-aggression, and (2) nonaggressive forms of playful anti-behavior. Before the emergence of language and culture, quasi-aggression must have played a key role, as in apes, because the principal social norm securing the viability of a group was conflict avoidance. Clearly, this norm was the first to be playfully violated. After the emergence of language and culture, the number of norms and taboos increased a thousandfold, and each became a potential target of playful violation. However, the inborn unconscious metacommunicative signal of negativistic play, laughter, while no longer as iconic and transparent as it was at the prehuman stage, has partly preserved its basic function up to the present.

This elucidates the connection between humor and laughter. Both turn out to be interrelated components of negativistic play – inward and outward. Playful self-repudiation at the individual level, that is, at the level of thoughts and feelings, is humor (metarelation neutralizing the relation); playful self-repudiation at the inter-individual level, where thoughts and feelings are communicated, is laughter (metamessage cancelling the message). The evolutionary succession of these phenomena, too, becomes apparent. Humor, as a psychological phenomenon which can get along virtually without outward supports, is derivative with regard to laughter. Humor results from the internalization and psychologization of something that originally, at the prehuman stage, was pure action with a minimal degree of “psychology” – social play. Having traversed the long path of evolutionary development, action without a model has turned into a model without action (Kozintsev and Butovskaya, 1996).

Being inborn and unconscious, laughter differs from the symbolic metacommunicative signs of self-negation, which are learned and conscious. Their role, unlike that of laughter, is minor. Examples include the sign of crossing one’s fingers behind one’s back, and the phrase “tongue in cheek,” possibly derived from the actual facial sign. Invol-

untary facial expressions contradicting the words are more important, but their role, too, is incomparably more modest than that played by laughter. A substitute for laughter is the smiley, which was predicted by Vladimir Nabokov in 1969 and introduced by Scott Fahlman in 1982 to indicate nonseriousness, not just positive emotion (apparently, computer scientists discern the meaning of facial displays better than evolutionary psychologists do).

Funnily enough, laughing people sometimes cover their mouths with their hands, being ashamed of their laughter (see section 1.1), although laughter itself is a sign of self-repudiation. This illustrates a conflict between cultural and inborn motives; however apes do the same when the situation demands that they repress the playful drive (Tanner and Byrne, 1993). The way of resolving the conflict, therefore, is very ancient. Human hands, like those of apes, are more subjected to voluntary control than are facial expression and voice, especially when the latter fall under the sway of inborn behavioral programs.

According to Deacon (1997, p. 421), “A call that may primarily have been selected for its role as a symptom of ‘recoding’ potentially aggressive actions as friendly social play seems to have been ‘captured’ by the similar recoding process implicit in humor and discovery.” An excellent thought indeed—but Deacon immediately steps back and writes that features marked by laughter at both stages, early (social play) and late (humor), are insight, surprise, and removal of uncertainty.

This is a commonplace of cognitivist theories of humor, as already mentioned with regard to Shultz’s theory, to which Deacon’s idea is close (see section 1.1). A superficial similarity between getting a joke and making a discovery or solving a puzzle does exist, but behind it there is a huge difference. The exclamation “Eureka!” is incompatible with uproarious laughter. No wonder: making a discovery or even solving a puzzle means finding something. But getting a joke, a pun, or a cartoon means finding nothing. Or rather, it means finding that we have been cleverly deceived, enticed on a path leading nowhere. This is the only common feature: mental effort is no longer needed. A trivial feature indeed! Let us recall Kant: “Laughter is an affect arising from a strained expectation being suddenly reduced to nothing” (Kant, 2007/1790, p. 159). Today this definition cannot satisfy us, of course, but it is at least more insightful than is the theory of insight (or cognitive mastery). A more recent psychological theory holds that the two traditional stages in the perception of humor – incongruity detection and resolution – are followed by a third stage: transition to the metalevel, from which all the

preceding, including incongruity resolution, turns out to be “nothing” (Ruch and Hehl, 1998; Ruch, 2001).

Indeed, incongruity resolution is not only insufficient, but also unnecessary for humor (see section 1.1). The similarity between humor and a puzzle is a historically late phenomenon typical of the most “civilized” forms of humor. Laughter elicited by these forms is less not more intense than that evoked by the most primitive forms like tickling or mimicking (McGhee, 1979, p. 160)—not so much because sidesplitting laughter is often considered “uncivilized” and is inhibited, as because puzzle solving, while being a fascinating occupation, has little to do with humor.¹⁵ Moreover, the two activities are mutually distracting. Were this otherwise, then, in the words of James Beattie (1776, p. 336), “Sir Isaac Newton must have been the greatest wag of his time.” Beattie was referring to Hobbes’s superiority theory, but his reasoning applies to the insight theory equally well. Newton was hardly possessed by “vain glory”; nor did he find his discoveries especially funny. One might add that problem solving is highly individual, which again disagrees with the enormous sociality of humor and laughter.

Recall the most primitive forms of humor, like the school pranks where a naive victim is entrapped into saying a nickname like “Pinch-me,” after which the play reverts to a truly ape-like behavior. The victim laughs loudly (provided no offence is taken), and so does the prankster. Would anyone seriously claim that the reason is insight? Is the child’s recognition of the fact that it has been fooled really akin to “cognitive mastery” that provides a clue to a difficult problem? Is the reaction the same in both cases? What does a child find when it discovers that a stupid nickname sounds like a request for tickling? Nothing at all. The feeling is that of one’s own slow-wittedness, a sudden fit of stupidity, a momentary mental regression. Is this the reason to cry “Eureka!”?

As all the available evidence indicates, in the past (rather recently, in fact) humor was quite primitive by modern standards and was hardly more similar to intricate puzzles than are modern children’s pranks. But even “civilized” humor, like jokes (Kant was absolutely right) is not in the least more helpful in advancing us along the path of knowledge. The tricks are admittedly cleverer, but the ultimate result is the same: strained expectation is reduced to nothing.

Evidently, the “change of recoding” mentioned by Deacon had little to do with the one he was thinking of. Ethological facts suggest that after the emergence of man laughter became a signal for a collective negativistic play aimed not just against group norms, as formerly, but

also against the two newly acquired basic human capacities. The first one is language—a radically new system of symbolic communication which is qualitatively different from any communication systems used by animals and which therefore may have caused something like a psychological shock in early humans.¹⁶ The second human attribute is culture, a collection of symbolically encoded dos and don'ts. Needless to repeat – it is a burden.

In our prehuman ancestors, the “recoding” signaled by laughter had an extremely narrow meaning: “I’m pretending to bite you, but it’s just play.” In humans, the meaning was extended to the extreme: “I’m pretending to violate all cultural norms and taboos, but it’s just play.” Despite this extension, the basic meaning of the signal has remained the same.

Peals of laughter caused by trifling and primitive stimuli as well as the contagiousness of laughter as such do not accord with the cognitivist theories of humor, but are easy to understand given the need for an occasional collective liberation from the burden of basic human capacities – language and culture. In view of this need, the pretext becomes a secondary matter, and the requirements for humor can be minimized.

All this in no way detracts from the aesthetic merits of comedy. However, art, like cognition, is only indirectly linked with laughter. The most powerful laughter-eliciting stimuli are primitive, standard, and independent of aesthetics. In the past, certain philologists and aestheticians recoiled from the idea that high art is compatible with something so base; and when the compatibility became evident, they preferred to reject the respective works in toto. Thus, Stephen Leacock (1935, pp. 14-5, 237) deemed Aristophanes and Cervantes antiquated; Mary Collins Swabey and Vladimir Propp resented brilliant American comedy films such as Frank Capra’s *Arsenic and Old Lace* and Billy Wilder’s *Some Like It Hot* (Swabey, 1970, p. 14; Propp, 1997, p. 133).

Such attitudes, it appears, stem from the misapprehension of the fact that comic art is unique, and that its uniqueness results from the amalgam of two independent elements – constructive (related to art proper) and destructive (related to laughter and humor, i.e., to negativistic play). Although both elements are linked by a common function, there is no intrinsic relationship between them. Moreover, the aesthetic element and that related to negativistic play (which includes anti-aesthetics) are antagonistic. Beauty elevates, whereas laughter degrades.

By applying aesthetic methods to the study of comic art we disclose its kinship with the high arts. But everything that sets it apart from the high arts – everything that is described as “low,” or “coarse” comedy,

and that infects the audience with a playfully destructive mood – all this is incredibly primitive; it lies outside the realm of aesthetics, for its roots reach incomparably deeper than those of art – as deep as the preverbal past, both ontogenetic and phylogenetic – the times when no aesthetics was to be found. In no work of art, not even in the creation of a genius, can these two elements of comedy blend. The humorist skillfully mixes their particles in various proportions, preparing a suspension that we wrongly take for a solution. Overlooking the heterogeneity, we describe the mixture as “gentle humor,” “genial laughter,” etc. Attempts at mixing comedy with condemnation result in an amalgam known as satire.

Nothing of that kind happens in tragedy. While the roots of love, hate, and grief (like those of any emotion), also, lie in the prehuman past, none of these feelings are opposed to aesthetics. Having “flowed” into culture and language, emotions freely blend with the human capacity and enrich it. Laughter, too, has biological roots, but it alone rebels against the transition from nature to culture.

Laughter is no less independent of cognition than of art. In fact, laughter is antagonistic to knowledge. If one would have to look for its verbal equivalents, exclamations like “Eureka!” or “I got it!” would by no means be the best candidates. Perhaps, to verbalize this paradoxical signal, one would need two mutually exclusive commands: “You may!” and “Don’t!” given simultaneously. This would mean an instantaneous breach (but not cancellation) of the internal ban; a permission to do something that cannot be permitted: throwing off everything man has loaded on his shoulders in the course of evolution; regressing in the same manner as children do when they occasionally throw off everything they have learned, without forgetting it. The overlap of two mutually exclusive commands makes it impossible to obey either of them. This is not required, though. Laughter in no way strives to be verbalized or explained; in fact, it goes all out to avoid verbalization and explanation. Its aim is precisely the opposite: to block the verbal channel and to cancel everything that is transmitted by it.

This illustrates the zoological principle formulated by Baerends (1975): displays (social signals) are evolutionarily more conservative than their motivations; therefore no direct agreement between them is to be expected. An old signal can acquire new meanings. After the emergence of language, the functions of laughter had been enormously extended, and it had to become far more intense than it was in apes. Man is the only primate using an acoustic play signal – a very loud one, in fact. Animals normally use visual play signals, evidently because of the

risk of attracting predators at the moment when the potential victims are the most vulnerable to attack (Aldis, 1975, p. 272). At the physiological level, the intensity of human laughter results from the inhibition of its subcortical mechanisms by the neocortex; therefore laughter has to burst through the cortical barrier. Being incompatible with speech, laughter functions as its temporary blocker.

One more possible ethological facet of laughter should be noted. It has long been known that laughter can be one of those strange and seemingly useless behavioral responses which share only one feature: they emerge in the gaps between adequate behavioral patterns during motivational deadlock or conflict between motives. Ethologists have labeled them “displacement activities” (Kortlandt, 1940; Tinbergen, 1952). Schmidt (1957) appears to have been the first to note that laughter is a displacement activity. Leyhausen (1973) subscribed to this view and suggested that laughter is a phenomenon of the same type as aimless sand digging in sticklebacks, unmotivated hair licking in cats, or perplexed head scratching in humans. Later, the idea was elaborated by Russell (1987, pp. 38, 49), who compared laughter with “substitute reactions” like floor walking, finger tapping, cold sweat, vomiting, and crying. Later, we suggested that laughter, crying and yawning are both displacement activities and social releasers that became especially adaptive after the emergence of language (Kozintsev and Butovskaya, 1999). Recently, similar ideas were expressed by Hall (2009).

Initially, displacement activities were believed to be mere substitutes for adequate ones (Kortlandt, 1940; Tinbergen, 1952). Later it was shown that the former have their own motives, but are inhibited under normal conditions. Disinhibition occurs in situations where stronger drives conflict or cannot be realized for other reasons (Andrew, 1956; van Iersel and Bol, 1958; Hinde, 1970, pp. 414-6; McFarland, 1985, pp. 382-7).

This agrees with the conclusion of neural scientists (Deacon, 1992, 1997; Wild et al., 2003), who have demonstrated that spontaneous laughter is controlled by evolutionally ancient parts of the brain and is inhibited by the frontal cortex; its principal mechanism, then, is disinhibition. Recognizing that the ancient parts of the brain are inhibited by its evolutionally younger parts is in no way tantamount to accepting Freud’s theory of repression. Both in man and in his primate relatives, laughter marks the boundary of seriousness. What lies beyond this boundary is not a land of deadly earnest antisocial meanings, but that of meaningless negativistic play, which in no way imperils the integrity of either the self or the society.

The concept of disinhibition was widely used by psychologists of the Pavlovian school. Boris Porshnev, who applied this concept to evolutionary psychology, used the physiological term “inhibitory dominant” as a synonym of the ethological term “displacement activity” (Porshnev, 1974, pp. 274-8, 284-300, 331-5). He regarded yawning and smiling as inhibitory dominants, focusing on their contagiousness (see Kozintsev and Butovskaya, 1999, on the disinhibition of laughter, crying, and yawning). Porshnev believed that the initial function of these behaviors was “interdiction” – the suppression of the partners’ excessive reactivity by inducing inhibitory dominants. Porshnev did not mention laughter; however, his idea that the evolutionally new second signal system (Pavlov’s term for language) and the ancient first signal system (that based on direct sensations and perception and linking humans with animals) are mutually inhibitory (Porshnev, 1974, p. 469) agrees with both ethological and neural evidence and is even more applicable to laughter than to smiling. The analysis of inhibitory dominants from the standpoint of Pavlov’s theory of the ultraparadoxical phase of the conditioned response, when “that and only that is permitted that is prohibited” (Porshnev, 1974, p. 335) is very promising for understanding playful negativism, anti-behavior, and archaic festive rites of reversal.¹⁷

Laughter, indeed, is inhibited most of the time. It waits in the wings, and having seized an opportunity, it rushes out and takes hold of us. The reason for this is not clear, since the emotional component in humor is minor (Deacon, 1992). Psychologists have long been puzzled by the fact that laughter – a tumultuous and virtually all-encompassing reaction – is in no way commensurate with the humorous stimulus, which is trivial and unserious, as, indeed, it should be. Dumas (1933, p. 269) with good reason considered this contrast a manifestation of the paradoxical phase of the conditioned response described by Pavlov.

Deacon (1997, pp. 245-6), to whom we owe much for our understanding of the neural aspects of this phenomenon, was unable to link it with the “change of recoding” that he mentioned. Insight, which he considers one of the key features of humor, does not block speech (as evidenced by the exclamation “Eureka!”). Nor, obviously, does it block thinking; rather, the opposite is true. Laughter, in contrast, blocks speech, thinking, and culturally guided action (McDougall, 1931, p. 389; Freud, 1981/1905, p. 168; Bastide, 1970; Minsky, 1984; Chafe, 1987; 2007, pp. 11, 17, 23, 69, 134, 145). For Provine (2000, pp. 36-9), who described the incompatibility of laughter with speech at the ethological level, this phenomenon remained a mystery too.

Festive rites of license, myths of the trickster cycle, and humor, which is rooted in them, mockingly “encroach” on culture and temporarily “abolish” it. All this suggests that laughter and humor alleviated, and evidently continue to alleviate, the stress associated with the human condition: life stress (Lefcourt and Martin 1986). Incidentally, weeping and yawning, judging by their ability to block speech, thought, and action, may have the same function (Kozintsev and Butovskaya, 1999). While “Eureka!” means that man has taken one more difficult step forward, laughter means precisely the opposite, namely, that the time has come not just to call a halt, but to pretend to step back and have a short rest in the imaginary precultural “Paradise Lost.”

Our phylogenetic speculations are supported by facts concerning the ontogeny of humor. Generalizing them, Herzfeld and Prager (1930) wrote that the essence of children’s humor, manifesting their ideas of *Verkehrte Welt* (“Topsy-Turvy World” – the name children often give to their drawings) is play, the object of which is none other than “the notion of reality, Weltanschauung in the most precise sense of the word; no sooner had it been gained with such difficulty than it is self-confidently cast off.”

The parallel with cultural evolution is evident. Similar playfully negativistic motives, which are inborn and primary, unlike cultural quasi-motives such as magic, apparently underlie archaic festive rites. No sooner had people realized that mock encroachment on culture is not dangerous than they began pretending to overturn the cultural Cosmos constructed by ancestors and replace it with an imaginary precultural Chaos. That the sense of safety was, and to some extent continues to be, incomplete, is evidenced by the mixture of laughter and fear that is so typical of festive rites, where all possible norms and taboos were playfully inverted (see, e.g., Ivleva, 1998, pp. 86, 88, 96, 104, for a description of a blasphemous play mixed with horror in Russian Shrovetide rites of anti-behavior). Likewise, children’s first attempts at generating humor in the form of inappropriate labeling of objects and living beings evoke a sense of wrongdoing and, accordingly, are mixed with some degree of fear (Chukovsky, 1963, p. 601).

In the course of cultural evolution, anti-behavior was gradually dissociated from magic and fear and became less and less collective and regulated, until it eventually evolved into an aestheticized, miniature, and utterly safe variety of play-challenge known as humor. However, its playful negativistic essence has been preserved, since without it humor cannot exist. Other components, such as the aesthetic and cognitive, while important per se, are secondary.

The role of laughter and humor as a means of “casting off” cardinal but sometimes onerous human properties was mentioned more than once. Schopenhauer (1987/1844, p. 60) regarded the ludicrous as a means of escaping reason. Freud (1981/1905, pp. 165-77) believed that wit and the comic helps us surmount the obstacles constructed by morals and logic. For McDougall (1931, pp. 387-97), laughter was an alternative to pity; for Bakhtin (1984/1965, p. 47, 336, 352), a means of defeating piety and fear; and for Karassev (1996, pp. 67-74), the opposite of shame. According to Mindess (1971), laughter liberates us from conformity, inferiority, morality, reason, language (in this case, liberation is reduced to verbal plays like puns), naiveté, redundancy, seriousness, egotism, and fear of death.

It is not easy to generalize all that. In any case, even qualities rather randomly listed above (the list can be easily lengthened), disprove the popular idea that laughter and humor favor “the golden mean” or are a means of culture’s self-correction. That this view is erroneous immediately follows from the fact that reason and morals, which are among the most oft-cited targets of play-challenge, are fundamentals of culture. We might add all other symbolically encoded norms from dogmata to the minutiae of common sense and etiquette as well as the code itself – language. Temporary liberation from all that, indeed, is the major function of laughter and humor.

On the other hand, the presence of qualities such as conformity (one might add its opposite, eccentricity), piety (and self-assurance), inferiority (and arrogance) seemingly uphold the idea of the “golden mean” and self-correction—but only at first sight. Being the quintessence of total mock negation, laughter is uncontrollable and never stops where it is supposed to, least of all anywhere near the “golden mean.” Having rejected one extreme, it rushes to the other, only to reject it along with the golden mean. It is sometimes said that laughter’s standpoint is that of radical nihilism and anarchism, which is almost true, except that laughter is even more radical because both nihilism and anarchism, just as any other human qualities, can be the butts of its playful attack. Like a fool, laughter rushes in where angels fear to tread. Ilya Ehrenburg remarked that attempting to use art for didactic purposes is the same as trying to light a cigarette from a lightning bolt or forcing a tornado to drive windmills. The same is true of laughter, the only difference being that it is by far less tractable than art.

Laughter achieves what appears to be unachievable: it neutralizes all oppositions at the highest level—that of the human condition at large.

Indeed, all the properties listed above are relevant for man but not for animals. Some are dictated by culture, others are rejected by it, but none have any meaning outside culture. To get “liberated” from all of them in toto and from a host of other human attributes is, in effect, tantamount to repudiating the human condition. *Laughter, indeed, is the playful antagonist of the human condition and of its basis—language.* And, as many writers have noted, the boundaries of humor coincide with the boundaries of culture. *Humor is the playful antagonist of culture* – universal human culture in the broadest sense, one that encompasses all systems of rules and taboos that exist in various cultures and can be mutually exclusive. “What, indeed, can the comic be from the standpoint of today,” said Eisenstein (1966/1934, p. 516), “if not the rejection of all that is real in today’s sense!” It remains to specify that “the real” in this case concerns only culture, not nature.¹⁸

Laughter is adaptive, not because it helps to correct defects, avoid extremes, etc., but because it functions as a universal negator and liberator, acting independently of our will or reason. This is why it is normally inhibited and waits for a moment to burst into any gap between periods of serious activity and switch our attitude from serious to playful, essentially urging us to revert to the preverbal and precultural state, to the negativistic play of our ancestors, thus securing social integrity at a deeper level than language or culture can do. To achieve this, laughter temporarily blocks speech and “abolishes” culture. After a short period of festive license, it retreats, letting language and culture regain their legal status. This is why we don’t laugh all the time even though we recognize the salubrity of laughter.

Now we can answer the second question: why does laughter evade psychological explanations? The reason must be clear at this point. We are accustomed to viewing speech as more reliable, at least more important, than preverbal unconscious metacommunicative signs. Laughter, however, tries to convince us that we are wrong; it insists that it is the nearly forgotten preverbal language that tells the truth, whereas words mean nothing.

The rebellion against language and culture cannot be long-lived. Laughter subsides, and everything returns to its proper place. The ultimate result of humor (apart from the pleasure of play and the ancient festive feeling of the renewed world) is precisely “nothing,” of which Kant wrote. If this paradox is not enjoyed, if the meaning of this strange play is obscure, all that’s left is to shun humor and deem it a dubious way of expressing dubious things.

It is no wonder that the rationalist disdain for laughter, stemming, in the Western tradition, from Plato, became especially pronounced in the Age of Enlightenment (laughter was despised by Voltaire, Chesterfield, and Goethe). More recently, Sully's pioneering work was virtually ignored and forgotten, whereas the mainstream theories of the twentieth century were based on the Hobbesian idea of superiority. Bergson regarded laughter as social retribution. Freud believed that hostility—allegedly a legacy of the precultural past – lurked behind the innocent façade of jokes. However, given that one of the sources of humor is primate social play, the explanation must be inverted: it is hostility (or rather mock hostility) that constitutes the “façade,” whereas inborn unconscious motives of humorous anti-behavior are friendly and have nothing to do with hostility or retribution. All the destructiveness of laughter is play and pretense. Where pretense ends, spontaneous laughter ends as well.

It is instructive to compare so-called “tendentious” (or “hostile”) humor with the non-tendentious, specifically, the humor of nonsense. There is no crucial difference between them: the essence of play-challenge is the same regardless of its target. Therefore, if “hostile” humor attests to genuine hostility, then the humor of nonsense must attest to a genuine belief in absurdity. If so, why don't the numerous theorists claiming that “tendentious” humor is a loophole for the destructive anti-social drives common to most people (judging by the popularity of such humor) venture to be consistent? Why don't they claim that the world, in addition, is populated by latent lunatics who, in the inmost recesses of their unconscious, cherish a firm conviction that two owls and a hen, four larks and a wren, can all build their nests in one's beard?

The facts discussed above may be helpful in considering what's wrong with satire, which indeed, in keeping with Bergson, tries to use humor and laughter as social retribution. Given the genealogy of laughter, the self-contradictory nature of satire becomes even more evident. At the conscious level, the satirist believes he has every right to attack his target; however, by his laughter he unconsciously signals that he deems his attacks wrong and asks that they not be taken seriously. Satire, therefore, is “correct incorrect behavior” and is thus oxymoronic by definition.

The satirists' conscious ends are motivated by indignation and are therefore incompatible with the means. How can an unconscious signal of mock attack accompany true attack? The incompatibility shipwrecks the satirists' conscious plans; the failure is eventually perceived, and frustration ensues. Swift expressed this as clearly as possible:

Like the ever-laughing Sage,
 In a Jest I spend my Rage;
 (Tho' it must be understood,
 I would hang them if I cou'd).

The iconicity of laughter, its connection with the ritualized bite signaling the lack of aggressive intentions, is no longer perceived. Its true meaning has been either forgotten or distorted in the course of human evolution. The permanent failures of the “psychology of laughter” are due to the fact that laughter has acquired independence not just from our will and reason, but partly even from our unconscious, at least at the individual level, having become more spontaneous and less transparent than any other bodily expression. Freud, who believed that the realm of the unconscious extends only to ontogeny, regarded his patients’ laughter at the moment when their unconscious was unveiled by psychoanalysis as an expression of joy caused by a return to the “childhood of reason”: “Thought is put back for a moment to the stage of childhood so as once more to gain possession of the childish source of pleasure.” (Freud, 1981/1905, pp. 227-8). True; but the problem of laughter cannot be solved without transcending ontogeny and the individual unconscious. The principal meaning of laughter is to be sought in our collective memory.

While being unable to figure out any single feeling behind all the multitude of laughter contexts (at least to verbalize it), we can at least suggest that laughter erupts whenever our innate playful negativism seizes the opportunity to “cancel” cultural norms for a while and to awaken the collective memory of our preverbal and precultural past.

Augustine’s metaphor “our hearts were tickled” (see the beginning of section 2.2) illustrates one of the situations of nonhumorous laughter. Psychologists would call it “nervous” or “social” and would explain that for boys pilfering pears from someone’s garden, laughter was a “defense mechanism,” a means of cheering each other up and suppressing shame. But what about jubilant, hysterical, and humorous laughter? And what do they all have to do with tickling?

To put all the bits of evidence together, we must return to the sources—primate social play (mock aggression) accompanied by a play signal, still iconic at that stage. Then it becomes evident that laughter has three inherent features. The first, related to the inborn and evolved nature of this signal, is spontaneity and lack of voluntary control. Strangely, Bergson, who based his theory on the automatism of human behavior as the allegedly main target of ridicule, only at the end of his book, in passing,

mentioned a far more important fact: the automatism of the laughers' behavior. He even failed to notice that laughter may have no target—as in the case of the young thieves, one of whom was Augustine.

The second attribute of laughter is its collective nature and, as a result, its contagiousness. “Yet, again, why did I find such delight in doing this which I would not have done alone?” Augustine, tormented by the memory of his misdeed, queried himself, “Is it because no one readily laughs alone?... Yet alone I would not have done it – alone I could not have done it at all.” (*Confessions*, Book II, ch. IX: 17, trans. by A. C. Outler).

The third intrinsic property of laughter, one we have already discussed, is its playful antagonism to speech, thinking, culturally motivated action, and culture itself.

While the first feature derives from the prehuman past, the latter two are a legacy of the early stages of human evolution. Taken together, they exhaust the essence of laughter. Other features may be present, but needn't be. These include humor, insight, and joy (“social” and “jubilant” laughter, and “laughter of relief” contain no humor and little if any insight; and in “nervous” and “hysterical” laughter there is neither humor nor insight nor joy).

Laughter does not merely *allow* us to stop speaking, thinking, or acting appropriately; having broken loose it deprives us of our will and *forbids* us to assess the situation in terms of cultural norms. This means a momentary forced liberation from these norms, from the associated strain, from the necessity to think, sympathize, obey, learn, make an effort, and, generally, adapt oneself to cultural reality. Even the necessity to speak is cancelled! Laughter is indeed a universal liberator (Bain, 1880, pp. 256–61; Mindess, 1971), but, paradoxically, liberation itself is in a sense compulsory.¹⁹ No wonder: culture has not just been forced upon us, it has been firmly adopted by us. Hence the need for radical means.

Temporary helplessness, occasionally culminating in cataplexy (Overeem et al., 1999) and paralysis of will²⁰ are similar to the condition experienced by nonhuman primates during social play and by “victims” of tickling. This may appear maladaptive because laughter, being highly contagious, makes the group vulnerable to attack. However, given that laughter was not merely spared by natural selection, but became far more intense than it was in our prehuman ancestors, its benefit must have outweighed the disadvantage it might have caused.²¹

Indeed, helplessness is advantageous when cultural norms become a burden that must be thrown off for a while. This forced return to the

fancied “Paradise Lost” may be subjectively experienced as pleasure or relief, but sometimes the feeling may be one of discomfort or shame (Pfeifer, 1994). However, the subjective experiences of someone who has been temporarily deprived of all human capacities including reason and speech (possibly even of the ability to stand upright) and who is thus infinitely far from understanding the true reasons of his/her peculiar state, are of secondary importance compared to the enormous task accomplished by laughter: alleviating the stress of culture.²² Bergson and Freud with good reason compared the effect of the comic with that of alcohol. The difference, of course, is too obvious to be discussed.

For partners in this legally illegal play, laughter is a means of collective self-vindication. If the entire community is engaged, negativistic play turns into a social institute—an archaic festival dominated by chaos and laughter and immensely contributing to group cohesion. Stanner’s description of the Australian aboriginal festival known as Tjirmumuk – probably the most archaic reversal rite known to ethnographers – may provide an idea of what happened during the actual archaic “carnival”: “(In-laws) push and jostle one another, snatch away personal possessions, pluck at each others’ genitals, and in laughing voice shout things which would ordinarily be obscene, embarrassing, and hurtful... The aim is to take (the in-laws’) food, gobble it with animalian sounds and gestures... The noise and turbulence are extreme, but good-fellowship is nevertheless in evidence, and the bystanders laugh heartily throughout.” (Stanner, 1989, pp. 112-4). Vladimir Propp, who studied pre-revolutionary Russian agrarian rites, which, too, were marked by anti-behavior, horseplay, and hearty laughter, wrote: “Man lost his human guise for a while and later had to regain it.” (Propp, 2000, p. 159).

If, however, play-challenge is not institutionalized, a dangerous alternative emerges: “unmotivated” mischief or even vandalism. Boys, for instance, feel a temptation to trespass on someone’s garden to capture a symbolic trophy – unripe pears. “[H]aving stolen them, I threw them away. My sole gratification in them was my own sin, which I was pleased to enjoy,” testifies Augustine (*Confessions*, Book II, ch. VI: 12). But theft, too, can be institutionalized. It can be made to coincide with specific dates; thieves can put on terrifying disguises, and everyone, including themselves, would almost believe that they are spirits of the dead demanding what is due them. Admittedly here, too, one strikes a balance between fear and amusement, but for reasons other than conscience.

It is not crucial what is being thrown off at the moment of laughter: whether it is fear, piety, conscience (in “tickling of the heart”), reason,

or etiquette (in “tickling of the mind”). In any case, this is but one side of the coin—the only one seen by Christianity; hence the bitterness of Augustine’s repentance. But the other side is that liberation is usually temporary, playful, and symbolic, and presupposes that whatever is thrown off has been firmly internalized.

“I did not desire to enjoy what I stole, but only the theft and the sin itself...” Concepts such as sin and responsibility are irrelevant to animals, but natural selection has guaranteed that play would remain play, and mock aggression would not be confused with true aggression. This rule, which, in animals, is controlled by inborn mechanisms and strictly observed, belongs to the most valuable parts of our biological legacy.

This is why laughing in the context of real violence is so unnatural (in the most literal sense), as evidenced by so-called “hysterical laughter.” That was the way subjects, tormented by shame and augmenting it even more, laughed in a cruel experiment conducted by Stanley Milgram (1974). Believe it or not, Milgram’s unsuspecting subjects playing the role of the “teachers” sent other people involved in the diabolic prank (both the “learners,” whom, as the “teachers” thought, they tortured for the sake of science, and the experimenters, who had persuaded them that electric shock was a useful pedagogic device) an unconscious play signal! Milgram interpreted this laughter as a mere symptom of tension, as most psychologists unfamiliar with ethology would do. If anything, this view is soberer than the gloomy Freudian fantasy of Gershon Legman, who compared the laughter of Milgram’s subjects with that of SS executioners, ending up with a bloodcurdling warning: “In any case, whether with poison gas, phoney electric-chair switches, or jokes, don’t let the hysterical laughter fool you. Under the mask of humor, *All men are enemies*” (1975, p. 10, italics in the original). The passage speaks for itself. The Freudian approach to humor is not merely unproductive but notably unjust (see section 4.2, where the relationships between laughter and evil will be discussed in some detail).

In the confrontation between culture and nature, the opponents’ strategies are different. Laughter attacks culture in a playful manner, believing this to be mere play like tickling. Culture, however, is serious, and the blow it delivers is solid. One should pay tribute to Bergson (1911/1899, ch. III, pt. V), whose aphoristic gift enabled him to accumulate in a short dictum so many delusions concerning laughter. “Nature,” he wrote, “has utilized evil with a view to good.” Bergson implied what he believed to be the egotism of the laughers and the punitive role of ridicule, respectively. If we ventured to summarize what we know about laughter

today as concisely as Bergson did, we might say, “Culture has utilized good with a view to evil.” At certain moments, nature is completely suppressed by culture; mock aggression turns into real aggression; and laughter, having lost its inherent meaning, gets “denatured” and is doomed to disappear.

But at other moments laughter wins even though the laugher may die, as in the case of gallows humor. Paradoxically, man’s biological legacy may help him to attain the heights of human condition and even endure what might appear unendurable, as evidenced, for instance, by Viktor Frankl’s humorous experiences in a Nazi concentration camp (Frankl, 1984/1946, pp. 34-5, 63-4) or François Villon’s and J. B. S. Haldane’s flippant poems about their impending deaths (see section 1.2).

Fortunately, mankind continues to laugh. By being inborn, spontaneous, and unconscious, laughter is to some extent protected from the distortions caused by language and culture. To preserve its meaning completely, however, proves impossible, and this vulnerability is the price we have to pay for all the richness of humor.

Notes

1. In right-handers, speech centers are in the left hemisphere, and its damage results in aphasia. In this case, the perception of humor is usually studied by means of cartoons, preferably without captions (Bihrlé et al., 1986; Zaidel et al., 2002).
2. The term “Duchenne smile” was introduced by Paul Ekman to label the sincere, involuntary smile, which was first described by the nineteenth-century French neurologist Guillaume Duchenne – the pioneer of muscular neurophysiology (photographs of his experiments were published in Darwin’s 1872 book on emotions). While the volitional smile usually recruits only muscles of the mouth, the genuine (Duchenne) smile also involves those of the eyes (*orbicularis oculi*). The mystery of Mona Lisa’s smile may stem from the fact that only her eyes “smile” whereas her lips don’t – the reverse of what we normally observe in “incomplete” smiling.
3. Owren and Bachorowski (2001) suggest that laughter, which, compared to smiling, is harder to feign, originated from sincere smiling when the cognitive capacities of early humans had allowed some of them to smile volitionally and thus to cheat their fellowmen. For a non-Dawkinsian, this appears to be one of the most bizarre examples of the “selfish gene” logic.
4. Sergei Eisenstein (1966/1934, p. 496) called tickling “a wisecrack degraded to the lowest level.”
5. This idea appalled Kierkegaard: “I am strangely alarmed when I note the extreme melancholy with which Englishmen of an earlier generation have spotted the ambiguity basic to laughter, as Dr. Hartley has observed. What if laughter were completely misunderstood, what if the world were so bad and existence so unhappy that laughter really is weeping?” (Kierkegaard, 1978/1839, p. 128).
6. The two types of tickling are not polar opposites. Even knismesis feels more ticklish when performed by a partner (Weiskrantz et al., 1971; Claxton, 1975; Blakemore et al., 1998). The probable reason is that knismesis is most often self-performed.

Understandably, people do not groom each other as apes do; lousing, hair stroking and ruffling are rudiments of grooming (see Löken et al., 2009, for neurological and interpersonal aspects of hair stroking). Rough-and-tumble play, on the other hand, is frequent, especially in children. Therefore even knismesis, if performed by a partner, may be perceived as play and elicit laughter.

7. The acoustical variation of laughter (individual, gender, situational, etc.) is considerable (Bachorowski et al., 2001). This, however, does not mean that qualitatively different types of laughter exist (feigned laughter aside). Compared to smiling, laughter is less feignable. Given the neural data discussed above, it appears that the variation is caused not so much by the hard-wired and autonomous subcortical mechanisms as by the inhibitory and modifying cortical mechanisms, which themselves are culturally malleable.
8. Ruch (2002) believes that this task is infeasible because humor and laughter are as different as pain and crying. This parallel is hardly warranted since the causal relationship is reverse. Neither in terms of physiology nor in terms of evolution can pain be considered derivative to crying. Humor, by contrast, follows laughter in both ontogeny and phylogeny. This sequence may hold even in synchrony, if we do not consider laughter as such (although it commonly arises as an “anticipatory reaction,” which, in effect, is not a reaction at all), but the need for laughter. While certain lachrymists do “invent” pain as a pretext for crying, this situation is abnormal and can hardly be compared to the perfectly normal situation where “funniness” is literally invented (in Jean Paul’s sense) to justify laughter. The reason is simple: while both humor and pain are subjective, humor, in contrast to pain and to all other feelings, has no objective causes unless the perceiving subject himself is regarded as an object. Therefore humor, unlike pain, *must* be invented.
9. Khristoforova (2002), using ethnographic examples, discusses the transformation of ritual (volitional) laughter into spontaneous laughter. This transformation is possibly due to the “coordination center” located in the pons (Wild et al., 2003). Outside the ritual sphere, such contexts appear to be rare. It is unlikely that conversational laughter has anything to do with this, contrary to what Gervais and Wilson (2005) seem to imply.
10. The term “anti-behavior” was introduced by Iurii Lotman and Boris Uspenskii (1977) with reference to magic rituals which were practiced in Old Rus when paganism coexisted with Christianity and which were in many respects the “reverse” of Christian rites (for instance, making the sign of the cross with the left hand or with the foot). In some ways, this behavior resembled the reverse behavior of the ritual clowns of native North America (Nesper, 2005) and of the participants in Western European Carnival. While stressing the distinction between such ostensibly blasphemous magic practices and comic parody, Lotman and Uspenskii admitted that the rites were both gruesome and funny. I believe that the term “anti-behavior” can be extended to all varieties of symbolic or playful self-negation. Humor is basically a form of anti-behavior (Kozintsev, 2002b).
11. Butovskaya and Kozintsev (1996b) have discussed primate and carnivalesque parallels to children’s coarse pranks, especially the use of excreta as mock weapons – “merry substance,” as Bakhtin called them.
12. Tatiana Shechepanskaia (2005) believes that such verbal provocations help children master the transition between two cultural codes – verbal and corporeal. If so, the corporeal code can be viewed as preverbal.
13. I thank Zoia Semenova for this example.
14. Originally said to a hunter with the idea that actually wishing him good luck would bring bad luck [*Trans. note*].

15. Certain theorists believe that humor is inherently related to cognition (Koestler, 1964; Paulos, 1985). Those who share this view can test it by observing the behavior of researchers – obviously, the connection must be especially manifest in this group. Do intellectuals laugh more than other people on average? Hardly so! Maybe, apart from everyday humor, they possess some special intellectual humor which does not require laughter? This, again, is unlikely. One thing can be said with certainty: scholars are normally amused, not by their discoveries, but by folly that surrounds research in the same way as it surrounds any other human activity. The title of Paulos' book *I Think, Therefore I Laugh* may be apposite, but only in the broadest sense – with regard to man as a generalized species member.
16. After continual and prolonged speaking we often grow tired not so much from mental efforts as from the very process of generating speech. Hardly any other being except man experiences fatigue from vocal communication, however long and intense it might be. The reason is not that man, unlike apes, uses voluntary vocalization (the same is true of birds and cetaceans), but that communication by means of symbols, which is unique to man, requires more effort than non-symbolic communication. We fail to notice this only because we consider speaking natural. But we are wrong. Speech, like culture, is artificial in the most literal sense (see Kozintsev, 2004).
17. Pavlov (1951, pp. 402-3, 454) viewed the reversal of oppositions and negativism in neurosis as manifestations of the ultraparadoxical phase. Symbolization by opposites is an important theme in psychoanalysis (Freud, 1963 [1916], pp. 179-80). The relationship between humor and neurosis has been discussed more than once (Elitzur, 1990a,b); it was also pointed out that humor is a salutary alternative to neurosis and stress (Lefcourt, Martin, 1986). The reversal of binary opposites is the key element in the semiotic theory of carnival (Ivanov, 1977; Eco, 1984).
18. Incursions of the comic into the world of natural and even inanimate objects (see section 1.3) do not contradict this since the issue is not one of the objects themselves, but of their perception by the subject, i.e. by man as a cultural being. Ascribing to things “the appearance of freedom” (Jean Paul, 1773/1804, pp. 78-9), especially of the desire to amuse us, means rejecting common sense, which is a *sine qua non* of culture.
19. Sergei Averintsev (2001, p. 81) has aptly described this compulsory liberation brought about by laughter: “(T)he transition from unfreedom to freedom introduces an element of a new unfreedom.”
20. In his book on laughter and crying, Helmuth Plessner notes that helplessness and loss of bodily control may help man remain himself. “He himself doesn't really laugh; there is laughter in him, and he is only theater and receptacle, as it were, for this occurrence” (Plessner, 1970, p. 116). “The effective impossibility of finding a suitable expression and an appropriate answer *is* at the same time the only suitable expression, the only appropriate answer.” (ibid., p. 66).
21. Recently, a number of Darwinist theories were suggested to explain the origin of humor and laughter by natural selection (Ramachandran, 1998; Vaid, 2002; Owren, Bachorowski, 2003; Jung, 2003; Gervais, Wilson, 2005; Weisfeld, 2006; see Martin, 2007, pp. 185-8, for a review) and sexual selection (Miller, 2000). These theories are mostly speculative and not any more plausible than the theory formulated by Sully more than a century ago (see above). When Sully's ideas are repeated, no reference to his work is made (Jung, 2003; Weisfeld, 1993, 2006). In a recent integrative monograph, containing a nearly exhaustive review of scholarship (Martin, 2007), his name is not even mentioned.
22. Certain psychologists have described what they believe to be a separate emotion, which is elicited by humor, expressed by laughter, and termed “exhilaration” (Ruch,

1993) or “mirth” (Martin, 2007, pp. 8-10, 155-6). In everyday usage, words such as “exhilaration” and “mirth” normally denote joy accompanied by laughter. However, joy is a distinct emotion, no matter whether it is connected with laughter or not. If the connection is obscure, it will hardly become more understandable if everyday words are turned into scientific terms. Perhaps Chafe (2007, pp. 61-71) had a greater reason to call this hypothetical emotion “the feeling of nonseriousness,” and Pirandello (1974/1908, p. 113) was even closer to truth when describing “the feeling of the opposite” underlying humorous reflection. Terminology, however, is not the main problem. The point is that human behavior cannot be adequately interpreted from the psychological standpoint alone without regard for ethology or evolution.

3

Play, Language, Laughter

3.1 Orderly Play as a Metaphor of Culture

While the idea that “All the world’s a stage, and all the men and women merely players” is nothing new, it is all the more important to revisit the meaning of this conceptual metaphor because the relationship between the cultural (symbolic) and natural (presymbolic) components of play remained unclear even to the outstanding cultural historians of the past. Thus, Johan Huizinga (2003/1938, pp. 5-6, 47), believed that “serious” play has biological roots whereas “nonserious” play, in particular that connected with laughter (apparently he did not regard it as play at all since it was of no interest to him), lacks such roots. The current state of knowledge shows that precisely the opposite is true.

Today we can state that there are two qualitatively different types of play. The first type is serious, or “orderly,” play. It is to this type that Huizinga’s words apply: “[Play] creates order, is order” (Huizinga, 2003/1938, p. 10). Roger Caillois (2001, pp. 13, 27) named such play “*ludus*.” The second type, to which researchers pay incomparably less attention, is nonserious play, “disorderly play” – “*paidia*,” “childishness” (ibid.). Even those who distinguish these types consider them extremes of a continuum (Caillois, 2001, pp. 27-35; Sutton-Smith, 1975). Meanwhile, there are reasons to believe that these are distinct phenomena which differ in origin, structure, and functions, but which have converged in the process of cultural evolution. They are not simply different, but also opposed.

The fact that in the naïve semiotic worldview both types are united by a single hyperonym “play” confuses the issue in large measure. The confusion is aggravated by the fact that Ludwig Wittgenstein (*Philosophical Investigations*, par. 66-71), who proposed the theory of family

resemblances, and Anna Wierzbicka (1990, pp. 356-8), who countered his ideas with her theory of prototypes and invariants, discuss the fuzziness of the concept “play,” but, like Huizinga, use this term to denote only one of the two types, namely, serious play. We, too, will begin with this type.

Orderly play is based on the use of symbols; linguistic symbols in the first place.¹ As Huizinga has shown, it is related to other kinds of symbolic activity. The relatedness, however, stems not so much from the play element present in various spheres of human life, such as religion, the law, art, philosophy, or war, as in the fundamental affinity of serious play with the main form of symbolization – language (see Jackendoff, 2007, on the isomorphism between culture and language). Because symbolization is completely absent in animals under natural conditions, and its emergence was, apparently, a revolutionary, rather than an evolutionary, process (Kozintsev, 2004), it can be assumed that serious play, which, like other forms of symbolization, is unique to man, is a by-product of language and, like it, has arisen by saltation rather than by gradual evolution. All attempts at discovering its rudiments in animals, including apes, have ended in failure. This applies to all kinds of serious play, from children’s simple role-playing games to ritual, theatre, and sports. Contrary to Nikolai Yevreinov² and Desmond Morris³, no “theatre among the animals” or “biological roots of art” exist. The rituals of animals and humans are qualitatively different, and therefore any parallels are superficial.

The essential feature linking orderly play, both of adults and of children, with language is that it is learned. The spontaneous imagination of children imitating an excavator or a bell tower has delighted psychologists, but the main role in the organization of children’s role-playing games belongs to their elders, and in these games there remains but little of innate impulses, freedom, and spontaneity. The actions of children imitating adults are just as regulated as the actions of participants in a ritual. One should remember both peer pressure and the fate of mavericks who avoid playing. If it were different, games would not be so conservative.

The main function of role playing is to reproduce something real or imagined. Therefore its signification is one level above what is being reproduced. A thermometer is not supposed to designate anything, but a stick designating a thermometer in play is a first-level sign. Money or tickets in ordinary life are in themselves first-level signs, whereas pieces of paper used by children playing “store” or “airplane” are signs

of signs, that is, second-level signs, or metasigns. In effect, children's role playing is serious metaplay, a working model of culture with the conventionality of signs inherent in culture, but running "in neutral" due to an additional level of signification.

As the ethnographer Sergei Tokarev once observed, the essence of religion is not so much people's belief in the supernatural as their relation to each other with respect to their belief in the supernatural. This idea is applicable to children's serious metaplay as well. Role playing does not simulate the essence of the cultural phenomena being reproduced (which is often unclear to children and, more importantly, which does not become clearer during play). Rather, it reproduces the relationships between the partners playing the roles.

Mastering culture through play is similar to mastering language. According to Ferdinand de Saussure, "any linguistic fact consists of a relationship, and nothing but a relationship" (Saussure, 2006/ posthumous, p. 188). Developing this analogy and using the terms of Saussure, who insisted on distinguishing language and speech (Saussure, 1986/1916, pp. 8-17), we can say that the child first acquires the formal and fundamental principle of *the language of culture*, which is that social roles form oppositions (cop/robber, teacher/pupil, seller/buyer, doctor/patient, etc.). Realization of these roles, their content (for example, their moral aspect) – *the speech of culture* – is acquired later, and therefore less firmly. This is attested, for example, by the famous experiments of social psychologists – Philip Zimbardo (mock prison) and Stanley Milgram (mock punishment by electric shock). For the majority of people the most important thing is not what they were taught in the family, at school, and in church, but that a role is a role and the relations of jailer to prisoner or subject to psychologist cannot fall outside the limits of the respective social roles no matter whether the issue is about metaplay (i.e., play proper) or about first-level play (i.e., life). An individual's merging with a role is the cost of social order.

Tolstoy, who late in life more and more often viewed culture not from its own level, but from the metalevel (though with unwavering seriousness), has convincingly shown that the state, the church, the courts, and art contain a strong element of convention and play, whence he concluded that these institutions were useless. Whatever one might think of this conclusion, the parallel between culture and play is beyond doubt. It is commonly believed that material signs used in children's play, like those used in theatre, are but props, whereas those used in everyday life are not because they provide realization of vital needs. But the status

of ritual objects is defined by how strongly each of us believes and by what precisely we believe. Thus, the believer for whom the host is actually Christ's body does not deal with any sign at all. The believer who distinguishes between the *substantia* and the *accidentia*, that is, the one for whom the host is equivalent to Christ's body, deals with a first-level sign. Finally, the one who takes Communion out of habit or conformism operates with a metasign, like a child engaged in metaplay. The complexity here lies in the fact that beliefs and feelings, unlike signs, form a continuum such as, for example, that between the feelings of an Orthodox Christian who is supposed to take Christ's words literally and those of a Roman Catholic who believes in transubstantiation.

Though adults, unlike children, are theoretically supposed to imitate not only the outward aspects of social interactions, in practice culture does not demand that each of its representatives play his role with utter sincerity. Ultimately, "belief" or "disbelief" is a personal matter. Society cares about externals. Imitation (one may prefer to call it "socialization") is usually sufficient to maintain order. "The child cries as a patient in a game," wrote Vygotsky, "(to show how you cry is a difficult thing) and rejoices as a player" (Vygotsky, 1999, p. 337). The analogy with ritual weeping and laughter (Reinach, 1912) is obvious, as is the fact that outward signs are quite sufficient in both cases. Therefore purely Aristophanean tricks like those described in Pushkin's *Boris Godunov* will also work:

 "...As everyone is crying,
 We also, brother, will begin to cry."
 "Brother, I try my best, but can't." "Nor I.
 Have you not got an onion?" "No; I'll wet
 My eyes with spittle."⁴

Distinctions between children's role playing, theatre, and ritual are purely quantitative. All are versions of serious metaplay. It is just as difficult to draw a qualitative boundary line between sacral and profane activities (i.e., first-level, serious play). These are but different means directed at attaining the same ends, while the results are sometimes equally unpredictable. To the question "Will this medicine help?" a doctor can make an evasive gesture as would a priest do in response to the question "Will this ritual help?" This answer is verbalized as something like "this, at least, is what our predecessors/ancestors did in these circumstances." And yet again the parallel with role play is obvious. Therefore, it is unlikely that such play serves only to assist the develop-

ment of abstract thinking and declines by the end of the preschool period as many psychologists claim.

In sum, it would be wrong to believe that only children are engaged in role playing. Rather, among adults this play assumes different forms. Competitive games (*agôn*, in Caillois' terminology), to which Huizinga paid so much attention, and which, according to certain scholars, promote cultural revolutions (Zaitsev, 1985, pp. 204-7), are another "school of culture." All these are bona fide forms of serious cultural behavior. The issue is not the proportion of reality and illusion (it can vary widely both in a serious activity, and in what is considered play proper), but that culture has endowed man with a host of potentially interchangeable roles. This condition has no parallels in the animal world because a role is impossible without language.

In other words, symbolic activity, most importantly language, inevitably turns man into an actor playing a social role. Man has no "natural" (innate) condition; he has only a cultural condition. If, however, we remember the second meaning of the word "natural" ("normal"), then we can say that man's natural condition is completely unnatural; it is a condition in which no other species on Earth exists. This is the condition of continuous play, where it is possible to perform, simultaneously or successively, many roles that are sometimes incompatible (consider, for instance, the interchange of contrasting behavioral programs such as restraint alternating with license during the calendar cycle in traditional cultures). But not to play is impossible; moreover, all roles are equally remote from "natural" (innate) behavior. Orderly play is the prerogative of man, an attribute of his "artificiality," the flesh and blood of culture. The theatre of masks and puppets has penetrated deeply into the essence of this artificiality.

Playing means repeating the Other's speech (and, in a broader sense, putting on the Other's mask) in an appropriate context. The social mask, or persona, is the essence of serious conduct, and this is why the figure of the Other (the implicit narrator) is present in any literary work. For man, life is the enactment of various learned scenarios. What, then, is the essence of nonserious conduct?

3.2 Disorderly Play as a Metaphor of Nature

"Children and their games still dream of the remote past. Very often they approximate the same experiences with which their ancestors were also familiar and plunge into the same archetypal depth," wrote the Russian philologist Vladimir Toporov (2004, p. 45). Today it can hardly

be doubted that this, as he put it, “archeomemory” is rooted not only in the common Indo-European stage but also in the much more distant evolutionary past. The proof of this is laughter.

The order maintained by adults in children’s role games sometimes breaks down – children realize the conventionality of play, they switch roles, a role proves unsuitable, a prop is not representational, the whole plan collapses. Then children laugh (Elkonin, 1999, pp. 228-34, 240, 249, 251-7, 270). To be sure, they can also laugh during a game of blind man’s bluff or tag, but only when order is superseded by disorder, and one can look at the game not from its own level, but from the metalevel. Laughter marks the boundary of a cultural role; however, not the sort of boundary where one serious role is replaced by another, but the sort beyond which there is a breakdown into a roleless state, into chaos.

Being forcibly “relieved” of the burden of culture and involved in a forbidden game, finding himself on the border between cosmos and chaos, man can experience varied feelings, the most common one being a sense of thrilling pleasure, but these feelings are nearly always mingled with a certain helplessness. The stronger the temptation and, accordingly, the more helpless we feel, the more irresistible our laughter. This feeling is a common denominator for the most diverse laughter contexts, sparing us the necessity to draw a sharp boundary between humorous and nonhumorous kinds of laughter, as most theorists do.

Indeed, when for the first time in its life a two-year-old child utters an absurdity on purpose and finds itself on the verge of chaos (what will happen if words lose their meaning?), it experiences not only pleasure, but according to Chukovsky’s observation, a certain fear as well. A laughing adult, like a child, plays with chaos, using language contrary to its intended purpose (see sections 3.3 and 3.4), but also, according to Chukovsky, is enticed by means of jokes into “vulgar” attitudes to people, things, and events. Archaic festive rites forced people to perform collective actions that were unimaginable under normal conditions (Stanner, 1989; Abrahamian, 1983; Kozintsev, 2002b). Confusion, agitation, shame, fear in real-life situations, which can still be converted to play— all give rise to laughter. Whatever label we attach to laughter – whether “humorous,” “ritual,” “social,” “nervous,” or “hysterical,” as the case may be, – it always contains an element of helplessness caused by detachment from the role prescribed by culture. Orderly play is replaced by disorderly metaplay (see: Doty, Hynes, 1993, p. 30; Hynes, 1993, p. 214 on metaplay as a function of the trickster).

As was shown in the previous chapter, laughter both by origin and by basic function is an innate and unconscious metacommunicative signal that violation of the norm is not serious. It introduces the special frame of negativistic play, the play of misrule, which links man to other mammals, especially primates. The author of the psychological frame theory Gregory Bateson (2000/1972, p. 180) formulated the meaning of the play frame with respect to animals as follows: “the playful nip denotes the bite, but it does not denote what would be denoted by the bite.” Bateson’s formulation with respect to humans is this: “These actions, in which we now engage, do not denote what would be denoted by those actions which these actions denote (*ibid.*)” The latter, however, is also true with respect to orderly play, which is absent in animals. Nevertheless, it is to Bateson’s credit that he drew the attention of anthropologists to disorderly play, which they had virtually ignored (a spur to frame theory was the pseudo-aggressive play of monkeys which he observed in 1952). And though Bateson did not distinguish between the two types of play, it is clear that only disorderly play demands an innate metacommunicative signal since orderly play necessarily follows strict rules; not inborn rules, however, but rather those established by language.

Obviously, the term “frame” had a very different meaning for Bateson than for cognitive linguists, who use this term in the analysis of jokes to designate one of two alternative and equally serious ways of interpreting a text, that is, approximately in the same sense as Raskin and Attardo use the term “script” (see, e.g., Coulson, 2001). Frames, as cognitive linguists ever since Marvin Minsky have understood them, co-exist, form oppositional pairs, and replace each other at the level of the semantics of the text. Meanwhile, according to Bateson, acceptance of the play frame means transition to the metalevel and the appearance of the more fundamental opposition *seriousness/nonseriousness*. All other oppositions are neutralized by the metacommunicative message “This is play.”²⁵ Those who play disorderly games receive, in Kant’s expression, not “the positive contrary of an expected object” but “nothing.” Why is this “nothing,” the temporary abolition of meanings, so rewarding to animals and humans alike? The most general answer is this: because seriousness is burdensome.

In misunderstanding the origin and function of laughter, Sofia Agranovich and Sergei Berezin have fantasized a horrifying picture: “The moment when human consciousness arose is the first peal of laughter, still very reminiscent of the hysterics of a miserable being overcoming the fear and pain of a double bind.... An affective nervous reaction peculiar

to an advanced animal (in extant apes outwardly similar displays can be observed during moments of special excitation, panic, or danger) that has escaped from the dead end of a double bind... has gradually turned into laughter” (Agranovich and Berezin, 2005, pp. 241, 303).

This would be really scary, if it weren’t funny. We have here another example of how ignorance of the facts (ethological ones this time) gives rise to unrestrained fantasies. The idea of the double bind, in which the metacommunicative sign contradicts the message, belongs to Bateson, whose book Agranovich and Berezin know and cite abundantly. For some reason, however, their attention was caught not by the section in his book that bears on our topic (“A Theory of Play and Fantasy”), but by another one – “Toward a Theory of Schizophrenia.” The result is predictable: the authors focus on “hysterics,” while considering the connection of laughter with mirth and pleasure an illusion (*ibid.*, p. 274). One can only rejoice that mankind is still captive to this illusion.⁶

Actually laughter has never been an “affective reaction of a miserable being”; nor, for that matter, has it been an individual reaction at all. It has always been social behavior, an element of communication – an inborn metacommunicative signal, the meaning of which all primates, except man, understand perfectly. Natural selection took care of that; after all, a partner’s inability to distinguish playful aggression from real aggression could cost one of the players dearly. If so, then early humans, too, understood the meaning of this metacommunicative sign better not worse than we. Playful aggression accompanied by a signal of nonseriousness was indeed a double bind, but it caused no problems for any of the partners.

Loss of the capacity for metacommunication – according to Bateson, the main cause of schizophrenia – apparently became a problem only at later stages of human evolution. Evidently, the progressive development of the brain and the inhibition of ancient subcortical behavioral programs by newer ones related to the neocortex and speech were primary factors in this loss (to the extent that metacommunication is genetically controlled). A typical example of the double bind which is not understood by either the addressee or the addresser is satire. A consequence of this discrepancy between communication and metacommunication are the mental conflicts that pursue satirists (see chapter 4).

Disorderly play is based on the playful violation of rules. In animals, and in primates in particular, only one rule is violated in play, one which need not be encoded symbolically – not to attack. In humans, too, this rule holds, but it has been supplemented by thousands of other rules

which require symbolic (i.e., verbal) encoding and include metalingual rules (i.e., those of language itself). Accordingly, the exact meaning of the frame of disorderly play marked by laughter became extremely broad and is formulated thus: “Whatever we are now doing or saying is wrong, but it’s only play, don’t take it seriously!”

Obviously, this is a true double bind, but one that is normally associated neither with suffering nor with mental conflict, but with pleasure from play. In terms of origin this is the same pleasure as that experienced by all primates during play fighting (Aldis, 1975, pp. 26-8). The only distinction is that nonhuman primates, like other mammals, practice no orderly play and have no symbolically encoded social roles; accordingly, they are incapable of metaplay. Man, by contrast, constantly plays some role, transforming his entire life into serious play; and this provides an occasion for reflection and metaplay, both serious and facetious.

Like serious metaplay (for example, children’s role playing or similar phenomena among adults, see above), nonserious metaplay “runs in neutral.” But, unlike serious metaplay, it is not a working model of culture, but a parody of culture. Man in a humorous mood is still bound to repeat the Other’s speech; but now the artificiality, the histrionic quality of his behavior as well as that of the behavior of others become clear to him. The social mask (*persona*) turns out to be not simply different from what man believes to be his true face (*anima*), but utterly inappropriate. This engenders the irresistible wish to parody the scenarios man is forced to enact. The Imp of the Perverse appears, however not in his gloomy hypostasis which Edgar Allan Poe described, but in his most flippant mood, about which William Hazlitt wrote (see section 1.2). Now the Other’s speech sounds manifestly stupid, vulgar, incompetent, and incongruous in every possible way, culminating in a clash between the speaker/author and the implicit narrator. Whatever the speaker’s or author’s conscious intent might be, this parody is leveled not against anyone in particular, but against the artificiality of human life as serious play.

However, not every nonserious playing is reflection and metaplay. When adult supervision weakens, children prefer to play simple and rough games similar to animal play. By doing this, they do not parody anything but simply regress to the precultural stage. Here we see neither order nor the tension Huizinga wrote about, nor roles, nor elaborate rules, nor competition, whereas the meaning of laughter is very close to that in nonhuman primates, though in addition to a preverbal signal, verbal signals such as Russian “*kucha mala!*” (“The pile’s too small!”)⁷ can be used. Strictly speaking, all participants play opponents, without being

such. In essence, play roles are not mutually opposed, and oppositions underlying social hierarchy are canceled. “Opponents” (for example, the pursued and the pursuer) switch places, thereby emphasizing the symmetry of relations, the identity of roles, and general equality. Chaos and relaxation reign, and only one rule holds: keep the peace (Aldis, 1975). Symbols are unnecessary here because innate behavioral mechanisms suffice; in fact, they are more efficient than speech. Evolutionary continuity, which is altogether absent in orderly play, is quite evident in the play of misrule.

The festive behavior of adults is largely homologous to the pseudo-aggressive play of animals and children (see section 2.4). Bakhtin attributed to mock physical aggression a key role in carnival. Two more important functional homologues need to be mentioned – temporary abolition of social hierarchy and the innate metacommunicative signal of negativistic play (laughter).

What has culture contributed to disorderly play? First, carnivalesque behavior is always a reflection, metaplay, play with the wreckage of culture, with social roles – a parody of culture. And because the imaginary wreck is suffered by human culture at large rather than by any specific culture, the connection between the festive anti-world and an individual ethnic tradition that has generated it is as superficial, formal and optional as is the connection between circus clowning and the surrounding reality. In the words of Larisa Ivleva, who studied the Russian anti-world, in particular, mummery, “there is basically no national specificity of content here, no allusion to everyday life in the strict sense of the word; what we see are carnivalized stereotypes of mentality and behavior that are shared by many folkloric traditions” (Ivleva, 1998, p. 92).

Second, mock physical aggression was supplemented by mock verbal aggression. The same occurs in ontogeny after the acquisition of speech, and verbal pseudo-aggression, like its physical counterpart, is accompanied by laughter (Wolfenstein, 1954, p. 161). Bakhtin (1984/1965, pp. 415-22) has demonstrated the prominent role of “ambivalent praise-abuse” in carnival and, following Francis Cornford (1914, p. 49), wrote about its inexhaustible charm. When it is institutionalized, verbal pseudo-aggression turns into ritual invective that promotes fertility or wards off the evil eye (Welsford, 1968/1935, p. 66), or into “joking relationships” that prevent conflicts between certain categories of relatives in traditional societies (Radcliffe-Brown, 1952, chapter 4). Mock physical aggression, too, continues to be practiced along with mock verbal aggression, but acquires cultural motivation, becoming a form of contact magic (Frazer,

1998/1922, pp. 663, 668-70, 690-9) or “coarse bodily contact,” to which Bakhtin ascribed a central role in carnival and in related festive rites.

Third, playful violation of prohibitions assumes new forms in a cultural context. Though formally nature is subordinate to culture, they are in equilibrium as long as the key principle of disorderly play – the identity of roles – is observed. In addition to biological barriers to within-group aggression and violation of hierarchy, culture has instituted thousands of its own verbally encoded prohibitions, and each of them has become a target for innate playful negativism. The more numerous and stringent the taboos, the more pleasant it is to violate all of them at once in the collective metaplay of misrule, as though regressing to the “natural” state. This is how archaic festive rites (Stanner, 1989; Abrahamian, 1983), myths of the trickster cycle (Radin, 1956), and humor arise (see chapter 2).

But sooner or later the balance is disrupted. The fourth innovation marks man’s tragic break with his evolutionary past. Speech, controlled by consciousness, inhibits the innate unconscious signal of peacefulness. Asymmetry of roles enters into play, the pseudo-aggressive form of which degenerates into real aggression. I have termed this phenomenon “decarnivalization” (Kozintsev, 2002d; see section 4.2). The tricks of mummers and the attacks of satirists did not amuse their victims. The seasonal Saturnalian rites of mock enthronement and dethronement, which sometimes culminated in the murder of the temporary god or king (Frazer, 1998/1922, pp. 701-3), seem to have finally ruined the basic principle of pseudo-aggressive play – nonviolence. Saturnalian-like and similar rites of passage, sometimes culminating in acts of egregious cruelty, are practiced in modern “extreme groups” such as the army, the prison community, etc., but also in certain college fraternities, and are quasi-institutionalized as hazing (see Bannikov, 2002, for parallels between Saturnalian rites and hazing [*dedovshchina*] in the Russian army; see also Kozintsev, 2002d, and section 4.2).

And yet the inborn predisposition for peaceful play has survived under the heel of culture, though in strange forms. Having become almost opaque for us and striving to make up for this, as it were, laughter has become far more intense than in apes. Irrepressible laughter, with which we, like spectators at Classical mime performances, react to the imitation of drunks, stutterers, foreigners, animals, machinery, or even the elements,⁸ has nothing to do with satire or ostracism; rather, it stems from archaic collective metaplay of misrule, where, according to Propp, “man temporarily lost his human appearance, and had to regain it later.” The

ancient signal of disorderly play, powerfully breaking through all inhibitions, shows that symbolization is a paradoxical means of regressing to an imaginary precultural and presymbolic chaos. The affinity between humor and festive rites renewing the world by the temporary abolition of meanings suggests that humor is an adaptive mechanism mitigating the conflict between culture and nature. Humor, indeed, is an ancient festival concentrated in one instant.

3.3 The Anti-Referential Function of Language

Let us recall the comment of the eleven-year-old child who, while viewing cartoons, fathomed the basic principle of sick humor for the first time: “It’s funny because it’s not true, and if it were true it wouldn’t be funny” (Bariaud, 1983, p. 198). We grasp the meaning of this utterance instantaneously without noticing anything unusual about it. However, it is worth pondering.

What does the child master by age eleven or twelve? The ability to understand convention, to distinguish fantasy from reality? No, this ability is acquired much earlier – before the mastery of speech, at the moment when the child begins to practice what Piaget called “symbolic play” (McGhee, 1979, pp. 58-9). That this ability is by no means sufficient here is easy to show by replacing the cartoon with any bona fide picture, the imaginary subject of which evokes some feeling in the child. Any judgment in which the predicate “funny” is replaced by any other evaluative predicate appropriate to the situation represented in the picture will sound absurd; cf. “It’s pleasant because it’s not true, and if it were true it wouldn’t be pleasant”; “It’s sad because it’s not true...”; “It’s scary because it’s not true...”; “It’s amazing because it’s not true...,” etc.

No, it would be pleasant, sad, scary, amazing precisely if it were true! By virtue of art, fancy can affect us more powerfully than reality; however, not *because* it is not reality but *in spite of* that.⁹ And only the predicate “funny,” like other predicates referring to laughter, can render (not necessarily, though) such an utterance meaningful.

Thus, predicates referring to laughter are opposed to all other predicates that express feelings and evaluations. The humorous metarelation turns them into pseudo-predicates, pseudo-evaluations (see section 1.3). Unlike all other outwardly similar predicates, they do not characterize what is depicted in a cartoon (or told in a joke), but solely the perceiver’s mental state.

Let us recall Bateson’s formula describing the play frame: “These actions in which we now engage, do not denote what would be denoted

by those actions which these actions denote” (Bateson, 2000/1972, p. 180) This, as we have seen, is also true of orderly (serious) play. But whereas the frame of orderly play is penetrable, and therefore this play is based on bona fide signs,¹⁰ the key feature of the comic frame is complete impermeability. Whatever falls inside it no longer functions as a sign for us. It doesn’t matter what sort of signs we were dealing with – graphic images as in a cartoon, or words as in a joke. The only thing that matters is that they *were* signs and, having fallen inside a comic frame, *have ceased* being such. We no longer take them seriously.

At the same time, however, we keep in mind that if they were signs we should treat them seriously. And what gratifies us in humor is not what is depicted in a cartoon or related in a joke; in other words, not the signified. Nor is it the signifier together with the signified, as in any serious work of art, the perception of which is based on the equilibrium between involvement and detachment (recall Vygotsky’s words: “The child cries as a patient in play and rejoices as a player”).¹¹ “Willing suspension of disbelief” in serious art is a sine qua non of semanticity and involvement.

In humor, by contrast, the reason for pleasure is diametrically opposite – the loss of meaning by the object and the loss of involvement by the subject. The loss, not the original absence. Umberto Eco (1994, p. 170) described this as the “suspension of the suspension of disbelief.” What we, by force of habit, believed to be the signifier has ceased to be such. Therefore, when an eleven-year-old child says in the subjunctive mood “If *it* were true *it* wouldn’t be funny,” then the deictic pronoun refers to the signified – the same thing a seven-year-old child refers to when commenting on a similar picture with the words “It’s not funny.”

But when a child, for the first time, comments on such a cartoon by saying “*It*’s funny,” then the deixis no longer refers to the signified, to which the picture, despite its ostensible meaning, has turned out to have no relation, but to the former signifier, hermetically locked up inside the comic frame and having become a pseudo-signifier. By saying “It’s funny,” we do not express a feeling evoked in us by the signified or an evaluation of the signified, but, on the contrary, pleasure from the disappearance of all feelings and evaluations. In other words, we speak only of our mental state, which has become entirely isolated from the object. If we dealt with a sign, we ought to be shocked, indignant, etc.; but the reference has been cancelled, and the sign has ceased to designate anything. Involvement has given way to complete detachment – “anesthesia of the heart,” as Bergson put it. A child has been temporarily relieved of

the necessity of sympathizing, experiencing anxiety and crying – now it has a right only to laugh. Comic imagination, whether someone else’s or our own, temporarily deprives life situations of any meaning for us, turning them into empty envelopes, pseudo-signifiers.

Nothing like this happens in serious fantasy, which is based on bona fide signs. Don Quixote experiences genuine anger at the windmills *in spite of* the fact that they are windmills not giants. The words “I’ll cry over my fantasy again,” like the lines “The falsehood that exalts I cherish more / Than meaner truths that are a thousand strong”¹² attest to the genuine semanticity and referentiality of a serious feeling *in spite of* everything that contradicts it; in particular, in spite of the subject’s self-reflection. Even having become the object of rational metarelation, a serious feeling strives to preserve its object and remain itself.

Humor, by contrast, is hostile to reference. It does not oppose the metarelation; in fact, it arises solely by virtue of the metarelation. We find something funny not *in spite of* the fact that “it’s not true,” but “*because* it’s not true.” What we deal with is a non-sign which pretended to be a sign. It is precisely the disclosure of this pretense that gratifies us, not the signified nor the signifier. Neither one exists any more. What remains is the “nothing” that Kant wrote about (see chapter 1).

Marina Borodenko (1995, pp. 4, 26-7, 34-5 etc.) calls the signs used by the comic anti-signs. Anti-signs, in her words, remind us of the conventionality and “frailty” of the sign (*ibid.*, p. 75). True, but one shouldn’t think that such a reminder foreshadows a semantic upheaval or reflects a shift in serious attitudes. What happens is that man unconsciously reflects on language and culture. For a time he acquires the ability to view the level of signs from the metalevel, notices their conventionality, deprives them of the plane of content, and plays with the plane of expression. In essence, humor uses ex-signs, empty envelopes of former signs, or, in Kant’s words, “representations of the understanding by which nothing is thought.”

In this case it does not matter what sort of signs we deal with – fully conventional ones as in language (symbolic, according to Peirce), or iconic ones as in representational art. For the transition from the level of signs to the metalevel it is necessary that the signs should not be fully transparent. Convention must be noticed; it must be conspicuous. Moreover, comic convention, unlike that of serious art, must be blatantly inappropriate. This is achieved by various means, first of all by primitivization. It is impossible to imagine a joke in the form of a psychological novel, or a cartoon executed in oil in a realistic manner like the pictures

of Bosch or Dalí. Daumier's sculptural caricatures possibly mark the limit beyond which mock, that is, comic, primitiveness can no longer compete with a serious and gloomy grotesque.

And yet, is comic art really vacuous and meaningless? Doesn't caricature presuppose well-aimed mimicry and witty thought? Does a joke have nothing to do with life? No one in his right mind would assert that. But this is what unites comic art with serious art. What then makes them different? The answer is that wit, quasi-realism, resolution of incongruity, and similar artifice in comic art are but a lure, a means of confusing us and ultimately leaving us none the wiser, in a state of blissful helplessness.

All this, however, applies only to pure comic art. Any tinge of didacticism, dislike, satire or, on the contrary, of warmth and geniality toward the object, in short, any feeling and any evaluation reinstate the meaning of the text. To the extent that the referential function regains its lawful rights, a work ceases to seem funny to us. No matter, for example, what one thinks of Paolo Troubetzkoy's monument to Alexander III or that by Michael Shemiakin to Peter I¹³ and what one feels with regard to the rulers whom they represent, these works scarcely amuse many of those who view them as caricatures.

What then does a child learn so late – only by the age of eleven or twelve? It acquires the ability to make the comic frame fully hermetic. From this age on, the child can lock up inside that frame any topic, even the most traumatizing one – anything whatsoever; and what had been meaningful ceases to be so. Once this ability has been achieved, the humorous metarelation can be extended to all feelings, thoughts, and evaluations, and the playful struggle with the referential function of language becomes full-scale, encompassing the whole sphere of semantic behavior.

Roman Jakobson (1960) described six functions of language matching six constituents of the speech act: referential, alias denotative, or cognitive (context-oriented); emotive (addresser-oriented); conative (addressee-oriented); phatic (contact-oriented); metalingual (code-oriented); and poetic (message-oriented). Two of these functions present especial interest for us: the referential function, which is the fundamental or even the only one in the code (or information) model of communication, and the poetic function, which, according to Jakobson, is the only one which is oriented toward the message as such: "The supremacy of poetic function over referential function does not obliterate the reference but makes it ambiguous" (Jakobson, 1960, p. 371). Both these functions, therefore,

are not mutually opposed. The poetic function is not directed specifically against the referential function even when the former becomes fully independent of the latter as in avant-garde art.

Jakobson's classification seems to exhaust all logical possibilities, except that language in general, not as a specific code as in metalingual function, but as a human capacity – the ability to use codes – is taken for granted. A linguist, unlike an anthropologist, may appear justified in making this omission. However, even from a linguistic standpoint, a large category of utterances and entire texts, verbal and otherwise, do not conform to any of Jakobsonian functions because of being oriented toward, or rather aimed against, language in general. This mostly concerns humor.

The child's dictum "It's funny because it's not true" aptly describes a distinct function of language – the *anti-referential function*. Like the poetic function, the anti-referential function is message-oriented. However, in contrast to the former, it obliterates reference rather than enriching it. It is opposed to all other functions of language because of using its own distinct physiological mechanism – laughter, which not only differs from the speech-generating mechanism employed by all other functions, but is also antagonistic to it (see chapter 2).

Loss of meaning as a feature of humor has been discussed by Pierre Guiraud with reference to puns. According to Guiraud (1976, p. 112) verbal play presupposes the "defunctionalization" of language and evidences a playful revolt against the stereotype. S. Attardo (1994, p. 328-9) lists this function as "the last primary function of humor" and apparently conflates it with the poetic function ("language as art"). In my view, loss of meaning is the key characteristics of any humor – not only of verbal play (puns are none other than a parody of the poetic function of language), but of referential humor as well. The reason is that the referentiality of referential humor is spurious and the basic function of humor is to reveal this. While one could agree with Guiraud that humor "defunctionalizes" language and thus attacks it "from outside," as it were, we can as well view this process "from within" language and thus speak of yet another function of language, albeit an aberrant, in fact a self-destructive one – the anti-referential function. This function should by no means be confused with the poetic function because of being opposed both to it and to the referential function.

Humor, which Jakobson has apparently neglected in his classification of the functions of language, demonstrates that man can regard language – not a specific code he acquires through learning, but his innate capac-

ity – from the metalevel. The main feature of humor is the dominance of the anti-referential function, which is realized in all nonserious texts from trickster myths to modern jokes.

The fictitiousness of the heroes of comic texts must be clearly distinguished from the fictitiousness of serious literary and folkloric characters, who live in a special world and are quite real within its bounds due to the “willing suspension of disbelief.” The world of artistic imagination, like the world of lie and irony (see next section), can be called “the second world of reference” (one of the “possible worlds” of logicians), which coexists with the “first world of reference” – one that is believed to be the “actual world.” The heroes of trickster myths, Old Attic Comedy, and modern jokes, by contrast, do not reside in either of these worlds, and their entire meaning lies in their fictitious and parodic nature. No matter how tactile and true-to-life they appear at times, they are not even shadows of shadows. They inhabit the “third world of reference,” which, in effect, is a world of nonreference.

Whereas the divide between the first and second worlds of reference is the boundary between reality and imagination, both these two worlds taken together are separated from the third world by the boundary between seriousness and nonseriousness. The first boundary is relative; for “serious” fiction makes sense only insofar as it seems to be reality. Meanwhile, the second boundary is more stable because “nonserious” fiction does not in the least try to look like reality; moreover, it tries its best to oppose reality. If it falls back on mimicry, it does so in a most stupid way. Thus, Prometheus is a fiction, whereas the man who is supposed to be the referent of Aristophanes’ “Socrates” was by no means a fiction; in fact, he appeared, as large as life, at a performance of *The Clouds*, and during the action stood up to his full height and remained standing to the end of the play (Aelian, *Historical Miscellany*, II:13). And yet Aeschylus’ Prometheus makes sense to us only to the extent that we “willingly suspend disbelief” and perceive him as part of reality, whereas the reference to the real Socrates in *The Clouds* is fictitious throughout, and it is precisely in this fictitiousness that the meaning of comedy lies.

Likewise, if one compares the three Chapaevs¹⁴ – the real person, the hero of the film, and the hero of jokes – then it is not the first of them that opposes the other two (for he is known to us only from accounts the veracity of which is problematic), but the first and second taken together, even if they have little in common beyond their name, oppose the third. Or, to use the favorite examples of logicians specializing in the theory

of reference, the hero of jokes is not so much like Santa Claus – a “live,” flesh-and-blood (at least for children) character of the second world of reference – as “the present king of France, who is bald,” and other chimerical objects inhabiting the third world of reference. In the terms of Saul Kripke, the name “Chapaev” (like any other personal name) in the first and second worlds of reference is a “rigid designator” and does not depend on description, that is, on real or imagined qualities attributed to this person (Kripke, 1980, pp. 48-9, 56-7, etc.). No matter how much the legendary Chapaev differs from the real one, any judgments about either will still be judgments about Chapaev. Whether these judgments refer to what we believe to be the “actual world” or to any of the “possible worlds” makes little difference from the standpoint of language.

The third world of reference, by contrast, is an “impossible world” in the full sense of the word. Not that it is located beyond the bounds of logic and imagination; but that this world is rejected by the feeling of nonseriousness (Chafe, 2007, pp. 8, 11, 124, 138). This completely fictitious world exists precisely on account of its fictitiousness. Kripke’s theory does not extend to it. Personal names here are no longer rigid designators. Jokes “about Chapaev” are not about Chapaev,¹⁵ just as jokes “about Stalin” are not about Stalin. Neither the authors of the jokes nor their tellers nor their listeners know for certain whom they are talking about, what they are talking about, what exactly they are saying, or even why they are saying it. No wonder; for they converse as if it were not they but some other, “inferior” people, stupid and primitive, whose communication is devoid of any meaning. It is precisely in the parodying of their deplorably narrow purview that the hidden meaning of the whole undertaking lies, and not in ridiculing real or imagined referents, as we usually think. A joke, taken at face value, is but “a tale told by an idiot.”

From this point of view comparatively “realistic” anthologies like *The Twentieth Century in Legends and Jokes*¹⁶ differ little from the overtly parodic collections like *World History Retold by “Satirikon.”*¹⁷ Whatever the authors’ conscious intent might be, such stories, insofar as they are humorous, are not meant to refer to the extralinguistic world (real or imagined) but just the opposite: their basic function is to undermine reference and thereby to undermine language. To be sure, communication does take place, but not on the level on which serious discourse does. In essence, the purpose of such narratives – even the outwardly “realistic” ones – is to demonstrate the impotence of language, its inherent incongruity. Therein lies the purport of nonserious discourse.

All their structure, topicality, and occasional quasi-realism notwith-

standing, jokes have descended from myths about tricksters, whose conduct could be overtly insane and erratic (Meletinskii, 1986, pp. 174, 197, 288; Radin, 1956; Kozintsev, 2007b). The craftiness of these characters and even their ability to function as cultural heroes (Meletinskii, 1988), which is psychologically incompatible with their stupidity, apparently stems from the paradoxical logic of the archaic mind, in which the sacred and parodic formed a dialectical unity (Freidenberg, 1973a; see section 1.2), and the violation of the most terrible taboos could lead to success (Makarius, 1993; see Kozintsev, 2002b).

But the duality of tricksters can also be viewed as a product of the anti-referential function of language. This becomes especially apparent when alongside a serious character (no matter whether or not his referent is present in the real world) there appears a comic double bearing the same name as in the case of the “Chapaev” or “Stalin” jokes. Likewise, the parodic Dionysus and Heracles, although they coexisted with the “real” ones, could hardly be identified with them. It would be wrong to say that they did not deserve serious treatment because they behaved stupidly. On the contrary, they behaved stupidly because they were not treated seriously; or, to put it simply, people didn’t believe in them as they believed in their serious prototypes.

Behind the outward wit of the jokes lurks a hidden craving for the destruction of any meanings transmitted by language. The usual argument, which holds that “Stalin,” “Brezhnev,” “New Russian,” and other heroes of jokes are hyperbolized but basically realistic images, is irrelevant unless one considers superficial mimicry and crudely rendered “verity of characters” relevant. Both are not only insufficient for humor but also unnecessary for it. Neither is found in nonsense, in sick humor, or even in jokes of the Chapaev and Stirlitz¹⁸ cycles.

The difference between “realistic” jokes, which often seem to resemble scenes from life, and nonsensical ones is the same as the difference between animal tales and trickster myths or that between the two stages in the evolution of Attic comedy – the New and the Old. What we observe in all these cases is the “taming” of comic spontaneity, the attempt to effect a compromise between the metarelation and the serious relation. August Schlegel (1846/1809-11, p. 176) called the New Attic comedy, where facetiousness was mixed with seriousness, and fantastic buffoonery gave way to worldly wisdom, “the Old (Comedy), tamed down.” “[A]s the New comedy had to give to its representation a resemblance to a definite reality,” he wrote (*ibid.*, p. 183), “it could not indulge in such studied and arbitrary exaggeration as the old did. It was, therefore,

obliged to seek for other sources of comic amusement, which lie nearer the province of earnestness, and these it found in a more accurate and thorough delineation of character.” To clarify: sources of comic amusement can in no way lie anywhere near the province of earnestness. The question therefore is either one of camouflage, whereby realistic details only prepare for the sudden loss of reference and the collapse into “nothing,” or one of compromise, whereby amusement declines precisely to the extent that reference and seriousness are preserved.

In terms of the functions of a joke the comparatively realistic “Brezhnev” is indistinguishable from the fictitious “Stirlitz” – an apparent chimera engendered by linguistic play. Turning to the traditional comparison of humor with a distorting mirror, one can say that although such mirrors at times reveal and emphasize our natural faults, the proverb “*Necha na zerkalo penjat’, koli rozha kriva*” (You can’t blame the mirror if your mug is badly shaped) is clearly inapplicable to fun houses in amusement parks. A joke is not satire, but a parody of it. The “serious” position of a humorist, unlike that of a satirist, is indefinable. It simply doesn’t exist.

Trickster myths are fertile ground for postmodernists. In these stories, as in jokes, everything that deconstructivism, with little success, tries to impute to serious literature, is realized and carried to the absurd.¹⁹ The referential function of language here continually suffers defeat; the accent is decisively displaced from the signified to the pseudo-signifier; the point of view is continuously drifting, and as a result reality actually appears to be a linguistic illusion and a social construct. However, trickster myths are not a “triumph of language” as deconstructivists assert (Doueihi, 1993), but a manifestation of the anti-referential function, that is, a skillfully organized wreck of language. The anti-referential function cannot be the main one in language because if this were the case language itself as a means of communication would make no sense, which, in turn, would deprive this very function of meaning. If there is no original, there is nothing to parody. Meanwhile, deconstructivists show almost no interest in humor. No wonder: if any text is implicitly nonserious, then there is no particular reason to study explicitly nonserious texts. But the declarative unwillingness to distinguish nonseriousness from seriousness can lead to the real loss of this ability, and once this happens one can easily fall into a trap.²⁰

Like the heroes of jokes, the circus clown and his predecessors – the ritual clown, the jester and the trickster – do not live in any of the possible worlds and are not bearers of any meanings. When the clown is

placed in the real world, as, for example, in Chaplin's films, the result is not a solution of humor in seriousness but an emulsion of immiscible particles of each (the same thing, but with a greater share of seriousness, happens, for example, with some of Dickens's characters). It cannot be otherwise; for orderly play and disorderly play are opposed. Art, unlike humor, has no biological roots. How then can one reconcile the uniquely human form of comic art with the indisputable fact of direct continuity between disorderly play among animals and humans? In only one way: by admitting that humor stems from man's biocultural duality.

The anti-referential function of language (in the broad sense of the word) helps us understand the meaning of what we call "the funniness in life," that is, of what we perceive neither through language proper nor through the language of art, but directly. What sort of reference to reality can one speak of in relation to reality itself? How can one turn reality, that is, something not only possible but already existing, into a third world of reference, that is, into "an impossible world"? One has to admit that the so-called "funniness in life" is derived from "the comic in art" rather than vice versa, as we usually think.

This sounds strange; after all, children, as it seems to us, begin to laugh long before they encounter art. This is not so, however. "Shock games" (the earliest laughter stimuli like tickling and peek-a-boo) require of the mother a certain theatrical skill, whereas the child is supposed to be able to recognize convention and to reflect on it.²¹ And although, as Jean Paul said, "laughters preceded the writers of comedy," it was he who noticed that the comic is based on an illusion of intentional buffoonery which we "impute" to others. Real-life situations make us laugh if they are perceived as skits performed by the participants to amuse us. In this case, rather than recognizing the convention, we invent it. Life furnishes enough pretexts for this; after all any serious behavior is to some extent play based on convention. To turn, by dint of imagination, serious play into nonserious metaplay and an appropriate convention into an inappropriate one is not so hard. This is what humor does.

Stendhal laughed, watching from the sidelines as his mistress cheated on him. In such cases it is often said that a person is able "to rise above the situation;" however, such a "rise" turns man not into God, but merely into a non-discriminating spectator at an imaginary low comedy, capable of viewing from the metalevel the situation into which he has fallen. In short, rather than rising above the situation, man debases it, turning tragedy into comedy. The humorous metarelation creates "a momentary

illusion of intent”: “it’s funny *because* it’s not true,” or rather, “*as if* it were not true.” Viewed that way, a real-life situation loses its semanticity and turns into a pseudo-signifier locked up inside a comic frame and isolated from reality, as it were, – a scene from a comedy, a cartoon, a joke, that is, part of the third world of reference.

There is nothing “objectively funny” in the person we consider the object of our laughter, nor can there be; for he temporarily ceases to be for us a real object, the subject of a serious relation, and what we call a “nonserious relation” is no relation at all. What then does he become? For the laugher – a comic actor, a participant in an imaginary carnival, a distorting mirror in which the laugher sees himself.

The problem is that the “object” is not ready to join in the game. This nonconcurrence engenders innumerable dramas. The laugher, who has fallen captive to the “illusion of intent,” experiences pleasure so unlike all other kinds of pleasure – that caused by the liberation from seriousness. Unlike him, the person who has furnished the pretext for laughter – if he is not similar to those rare near-saints like the hero of Dostoevskii’s novel *The Idiot* – feels bitterness and anger because he supposes that playing *the imitation of inferior people* is beneath his dignity (a deceived lover is at times capable of laughing at his fate, but is it easy to tolerate someone else’s laughter?). Archaic people were to some extent freed from this individual nonconcurrence by the festive rites of license that renewed the world through collective and obligatory “degradation” and the ridicule of everyone and everything.

By far not all of us are able, like James Sully, to feel gratitude to those who inadvertently afford us a pretext for casting off the burden of seriousness (see section 1.3). And only very few are capable, like comic artists, of being grateful to those whom we ourselves willingly or otherwise free from this burden. The unconscious and unerring collective sense allowing us to grasp the essence of laughter in the theatre abandons us in life, where we, for some unknown purpose, try to preserve seriousness at any cost.

“Perhaps I know best why man alone laughs,” wrote Nietzsche (1968/1888, p. 56), “[H]e alone suffers so deeply that he had to invent laughter.” Bergson’s words that laughter is accompanied by the “anesthesia of the heart” express the same idea. William McDougall considered laughter the instinct that liberates man from bitterness of compassion (McDougall, 1931, pp. 387-97). Freud (1981/1905, pp. 295, 299) attributed to humor (which he treated narrowly and separated from the comic and wit) a similar function – liberation from one’s own sufferings and

the fear of death. As an example of humor, Freud (1981/1905, p. 294; 1928) considered the remark of a person, who, as the joke goes, was being led out to execution on a Monday: “Well, this week’s beginning nicely.” In fact, liberation from suffering, compassion, fear, and shame can become possible owing to liberation from reason, or rather from seriousness – to feigned temporary stupidity. “Folly with remarkable ease drives away both shame and fear,” wrote Erasmus (*The Praise of Folly*, ch. XXIX). Humor and comic art do the same thing.

3.4 Irony and Humor: The Two Ways of Playing with Signs

As the concept of “play” in everyday usage unites two qualitatively different phenomena, so the concept of “language play” (see, e.g.: Sannikov, 1999, p. 23) is often used as an umbrella term for two phenomena that differ in origin, structure, and function – irony and humor. Sometimes they are considered subtypes of the comic, which engenders the same confusion as does the association of orderly and disorderly play under the hyperonym “play.” The ground (an insufficient one, though) for such an association is that both irony and humor are opposed to bona fide communication. None of these phenomena can be described in terms of the code model of communication, which is based on the assumptions of sincerity and literalness (Schiffrin, 1994, pp. 386-405; Makarov, 2003, pp. 33-43). Both irony and humor are closely linked with parody. In light of the works of Bakhtin and Voloshinov (Vološinov, 1986/1929; Bakhtin, 1984/1963) and modern theories of discourse, especially Sperber and Wilson’s relevance theory (Sperber and Wilson, 1986, pp. 200-1, 240-1; Wilson, 2006), there is little doubt that irony often, though not always, is based on the latent repetition (“echoing” or “mention”) of another’s speech, which appears incongruous to the speaker, and, in a more general case, on parodying another’s judgments – in fact, on pretending to be another (Clark and Gerrig, 1984).

The same is also true of humor, but in a much broader sense (Curcó, 1998). Humorous speech, like ironic speech, is full of “latent quotations” (Kotthoff, 2006). Perhaps it would not be stretching a point to say that humorous speech consists entirely of such quotations, that is, it is entirely parodic. If so, we must subscribe to the strong version of the mention theory (see section 1.1), although Sperber and Wilson applied it only to irony without mentioning humor.

As humor concerns not only verbal behavior, one can speak of parodying any elements of another’s behavior. In contrast to the situation with irony, the object of parodying in humor is most often not specified; it

is hidden or is lacking altogether (Ducrot, 1984, p. 213). The target is an unspecified “other.” And since each of us is “another” for the other, and likewise for oneself at another stage of development, there is every reason to regard humor as self-parody, both the subject and the object of which is *Homo sapiens* (see chapter 1).

Contrary to psychoanalysis, everything that concerns another’s self in humor lies outside one’s own self as a whole, not only outside its conscious part. One can play with another’s self (consciously or otherwise), but this cannot endanger the integrity of one’s own self (see section 1.1). The same applies to “heteroglossia” and “ironicity”: irony exists only insofar as another’s point of view remains separate from, and incongruous with, that of the speaker. The text may be, as Barthes puts it, “a tissue of quotations”; and yet, if “the death of the author” were a real fact, and if any text were ironic, as the post-structuralists assert, the concept of irony would be redundant. No matter how difficult it is to draw the boundary between seriousness and nonseriousness, this boundary always exists. These states are polar opposites, which rules out any overlap. The opposition *seriousness/nonseriousness* holds even when all other oppositions are neutralized. All this links irony with humor.

At the same time, the two phenomena are qualitatively different, and these differences are often overlooked. Irony is a variety of orderly play and is intrinsically connected with language. It is both role play and competitive play. One of the interlocutors, while firmly maintaining his/her strategic role in the dialogue, parodies the opponent’s role behavior out of tactical considerations, emphasizing the superiority of his/her own role, and scoring extra points in the duel.

If one adopts the traditional rather than the postmodernist view of irony, then this phenomenon conforms to Grice’s inferential model of communication, in which conversational maxims can be violated whereas the Cooperative Principle can still hold thanks to implicatures (Grice, 1989, pp. 24-6). This presupposes consciousness on the part of both interlocutors. Even in oral speech, the nonverbal markers of irony are consciously controlled. They include a “blank” face and a deadpan intonation (Attardo et al., 2003).²² Being a purely verbal device (trope) and operating at the speech level, irony does not encroach on language. Rather than changing the meaning of words it only conceals a negative modus. This, indeed, is what Sperber and Wilson’s mention theory boils down to (cf.: Sperber and Wilson, 1986, pp. 200-1).²³ An ironic statement is a metalinguistic utterance whose modus, negating or questioning the dictum (proposition), that is, the initial judgment, is replaced by

the reverse modus, which explicitly or implicitly (by default) affirms this judgment. The adaptive behavior of the ironist's partner in play consists in recognizing the trick, discovering the non-bona fide modus, and reversing it. Thus, the sentence *Brutus is an honorable man*, when used ironically, implies that this is only a dictum, which is mentioned or echoed but not affirmed. To understand the speaker's true intent, one needs to change the implied affirmative modus ("I think that...") to "I don't think that..." or "I doubt that..." The dictum is unaffected by irony, and the same is true of the reference.²⁴ One can be uncertain as to what the ironist wants to say about someone or something, but there is no doubt as to who or what is being referred to and what is being ostensibly predicated. Thus, only the direct meaning of the utterance is cancelled, but it is replaced by one or several indirect meanings, which, even in case of uncertainty, are at least assumed to exist.

By contrast, humor, which is poorly understood by theorists and participants alike, and which uses an innate and involuntary metacommunicative signal of nonseriousness (laughter), belongs to the interactional model of communication. This model allows for the unconsciousness of communication and, in principle, applies not only to humans, but also to animals (Schiffrin, 1994, pp. 398-405). Humor is a variety of disorderly play. Here there are neither roles nor duels, and the Cooperative Principle holds only in the broadest sense and only at the nonverbal level. In terms of discourse, humor is "cooperative noncooperation" (cf.: Attardo, 1994, pp. 284-5). Compared to irony, humor is less intrinsically related to language, and this is not only because humor is not limited to verbal behavior. Humor operates at a deeper level than irony. Unlike irony, humor encroaches on the referential function of language and thus on language itself (see section 3.3).

Like ironic utterances, humorous utterances can be regarded as metalinguistic (see section 1.1 on the "strong version of the mention theory"), but in a very different sense. Irony is mostly concerned with reality, whereas humor is concerned exclusively with representations. Ironic utterances challenge the meanings, whereas humorous utterances challenge the ways meanings are expressed. By making an ironic statement the speaker mentions (or echoes) something with which s/he disagrees; by making a humorous statement the speaker mentions (or echoes) something which in his/her view makes no sense.

Because reference and dictum in humor are fictitious, the notions of modus and implicature are irrelevant. They are relevant only with regard to the pseudo-serious structural envelope of humor – to what

is erroneously believed to be its semantics. But humor, unlike irony, has no semantics. In contrast to irony, metaphor, and other figures and tropes, humor does not alter the literal meaning but destroys it without offering anything in exchange. Surprisingly, this fact is overlooked by the vast majority of theorists, many of whom view humor as a reflection of social and personal conflicts.

Being not so much a verbal device as a means of undermining language and speech, humor explodes not only the meanings conveyed by speech, but also speech itself, as it is incompatible with laughter. The latter fact has been convincingly demonstrated both on the neurophysiological level (Deacon, 1997, pp. 245-6) and on the behavioral level (Provine, 2000, pp. 36-9). Humor and laughter were described as a “short circuit” (Freud, 1981/1905, p. 168), a “disruption of reasoning” (Minsky, 1984), and a “disabling mechanism” (Chafe, 1987). By contrast, for irony as maieutics (“spiritual midwifery,” according to Socrates), laughter is counter-indicative. At least Socrates himself, apparently, did not feel any need to laugh.²⁵

Salvatore Attardo believes that the difference between irony and humor is minor and amounts to the fact that humor is unrelated to didactics or evaluation. In support of this idea he cites the fact that up to a quarter of the utterances regarded as ironic provoke laughter in the listeners (Attardo, 2001a). The examples cited by him apparently pertain to jocular verbal duels where formally ironic utterances are used for humorous purposes (Pexman and Zvaigzne, 2004; see below). Attardo believes that from a theoretical standpoint it is useless to differentiate between humor and irony, although empirically such a distinction can be interesting. In my opinion, precisely the opposite is true: with a proper theoretical approach, the two phenomena appear qualitatively different, in fact opposed; however, because of the insistent attempts of humor to “absorb” irony, an empirical differentiation is often difficult because the formal grounds for it are lacking.

The qualitative distinction between irony and humor is emphasized by a huge developmental gap between them. Children do not understand irony before the age of five to six (Dews et al., 1996; Giora and Fein, 1999). But even eight-year-old children, who are already able to grasp its critical meaning, still do not see anything funny in it (Pexman and Harris, 2003). The “absorption” of irony by humor occurs later. By contrast, verbal humor appears in children at the very first stages of language acquisition, and preverbal humor appears even earlier, probably simultaneously with or shortly after the appearance of laughter.

Irony is entirely based on the referential function of language. The role of reference in irony is no less than in bona fide communication because an ironic statement like a false one means exactly the same thing as it would mean if the speaker believed it. Irony as well as the lie is based on bona fide verbal signs. For both the ironist and the liar reference is no less important than for an honest-to-goodness person.

Because in irony as well as in the lie the dictum remains unaffected, irony is much closer to the lie than to humor. This becomes obvious when the ironist does not care whether his irony has been understood or even aspires to the opposite.²⁶ The speaker's intent and the listener's astuteness are pragmatic factors which do not affect the semantics of the proposition. The latter remains the same, no matter whether the Cooperative Principle is violated or whether only additional cognitive efforts on the part of one of the participants are required.

We will now examine how irony and humor function in discourse, and we will confine ourselves to evaluative judgments. It would seem that in this elementary case irony and humor can be easily confused because the context is minimal. Actually, it is here that their distinction is especially evident.

An ironic evaluation is antiphrastic and therefore admits of both agreement and disagreement. In agreement, the second remark can be either serious or ironic, matching the mode of the first. – *A nice guy, isn't he?* – *Yes, a son of a bitch indeed* (– *Yeah, a really, really nice guy*). – *Good weather, eh?*²⁷ – *Yes, disgusting!* (– *Yeah, it couldn't be better*). Disagreement is usually expressed in a serious form. But a negative meta-judgment whose proposition is another's ironic judgment is, apparently, impossible because it ignores the non-bona fide modus. In such cases we do not answer by negating an ironic remark (the ironic utterances cited above cannot be answered by **No, he's not a "nice guy"*²⁸ or **No, the weather's not "good" at all*, even if citation is prosodically marked), but by affirming it, whereby we replace the implicit negative modus by the positive one, reinvesting the judgment with its literal sense, of which it has been unfairly (in our view) deprived by irony: – *Yes, if you please, he is a nice guy*; – *Yes, it's good for me*. These examples show that irony does not reverse the meaning of the evaluative predicate, but only the modus.

The situation is somewhat different if instead of the usual ironic shift (a negative evaluation disguised as a positive one) the opposite shift takes place. This is the so-called "re-addressed irony" (Yermakova, 2005, pp. 92-9) – approving of the referent but disapproving of his/her/its negative

evaluation by someone, possibly by the referent himself: *I know what sort of a poor player you are* (N. Gogol, *Dead Souls*), or *These American-made cars that break down after 100,000 miles!* (Attardo, 2000). Re-addressed irony is rather rare and is necessarily citational, thus providing an ideal support to Sperber and Wilson's "mention theory."

Let us examine one famous instance of re-addressed irony in more detail. Dostoevskii titled his novel *The Idiot*, whereas its hero was called thus by others. In view of the overtly polemical nature of re-addressed irony, the reader is free to ignore it and to insert quotation marks. And, though the author himself for some reason employs this expressive predicate,²⁹ we are entitled to enter into a dialogue (serious or ironic) not with him, but with those whom he quotes. Accordingly, the ban on negation, which holds in the case of usual irony, is removed, and both alternative second remarks will be relevant in a sense: – *No! He's not an idiot at all!* (In the ironic mode – *Sure enough, an idiot indeed!*) or – *An idiot, of course, what else?* (In the ironic mode – *Oh sure, wiser than anyone else*). The author takes no part in the dispute, though, because not the smallest trace of his dialectic irony has been left. But at least there is an exchange of ideas, if trivial ones. Therefore in this case, too, irrespective of the mode of the second remark (serious or ironic), the disputers are on the same plane – that of verbal communication. Were it otherwise, how could Socrates have possibly called irony "maieutics" (the midwifery of thought)? At a higher level, but on the same plane, the author can join the conversation: *Don Quixote ... is beautiful only because he is funny at the same time ... This is the bitterest irony man could possibly express.*³⁰

The use of a pejorative to express approval formally links re-addressed irony with humor, in particular, with what Bakhtin (1984/1965, pp. 422, 426, 427, 460, etc.) called "ambivalent praise-abuse." The famous *Well done, Pushkin, well done, you son of a bitch!*³¹ is of that type. Of course, this is humor rather than re-addressed irony: there are no contextual clues suggestive of citation.

What we see here is something that is altogether absent in irony, but is inherent in humor: a metarelation directed against one's own relation, not against another's relation (see section 1.2). The subject apparently approves of the object (in this case, of himself), but asserts the opposite, pretending to negate his own attitude. However, the metacommunicative signal of negativistic play – laughter – in turn negates the words (this, indeed, is its principal function). By negating the negation we come full circle. Everything returns to its proper place. But why was such a roundabout route necessary?

In effect, the speaker encroaches on language. For him it seems important not so much to utter praise as to initiate a play against language. This does not explain much, though. Antagonism to language can be serious rather than playful. Silence can be utterly tragic. But a humorist or a comedian is not silent; he speaks and, moreover, he says something silly and crude. He imitates the “inferior people.”

Oswald Ducrot believes that humor is merely a subtype of irony, its only distinctive feature being absence of citation or polemic tendency (Ducrot, 1984, p. 213). According to Ducrot, incongruity in the case of humor cannot be attributed to anyone except the speaker himself; it is addressed to everyone and to no one in particular. The same thing, however, also applies to ordinary ironic statements expressing a negative evaluation disguised as a positive one (*A nice guy, isn't he? Good weather, eh?*).³² Ducrot's criterion does not distinguish them from humorous utterances, and the same applies to Sperber and Wilson's mention theory (these authors do not discuss humor). And yet there is a difference – a significant one, in fact. This difference manifests itself in discourse, specifically in what follows the utterance. Whether the ironic statement is a reply in a dialogue or not, and whether it is re-addressed or not, it always allows for an answer, and sometimes even demands one.

A humorous utterance, by contrast, does not demand either a serious or an ironic reply and sometimes does not even allow for one because, unlike irony, humor invalidates the evaluative predicate rather than the modus alone. Jocular abuse and ironic praise are not symmetric. The latter is completely antiphrastic whereas the former is not. In Kant's terms, in the case of irony we receive “a positive opposite of the expected subject,” whereas in the case of humor we receive “nothing.” If Viazemskii had seriously answered Pushkin, *Well done indeed* (or *Yes, you're simply a genius*), this answer would have sounded somewhat dissonant to the jocular self-estimation *You son of a bitch!* although the ironic utterance *Well done!* can, in certain situations, be answered seriously: *Yes, a son of a bitch indeed*. An ironic echo of Pushkin's remark would be an utterly inappropriate expression of praise: **Oh yes, a son of a bitch indeed!* Likewise inappropriate, even if Pushkin were in any way at fault, would also be the serious **Yes, if you wish to know, you are a son of a bitch*. Actually a jocular utterance makes any answer inappropriate. It interrupts the dialogue, sometimes by means of laughter. Communication can proceed but on a quite different, nonverbal, plane. The reason is that humor, in contrast to irony, destroys meaning rather

than conveying it. This becomes especially obvious when irony is parodied by humor (see below).

Certain linguists believe that humor, like irony, operates at the level of speech and does not violate the norms of language. Thus, Anna Wierzbicka (1992, p. 239) writes that the meaning of pejoratives in jocular speech is not reversed: "It is always bad (pejorative), although this very badness can be exploited in jocular insults." True, Bakhtin's term "ambivalent praise-abuse" is somewhat misleading. Playful abuse is not ambiguous (polysemous); rather, in jocular speech (in contrast to re-addressed irony) the unambiguously abusive expression is used contrary to its intended function. This is what accounts for incongruity, which would not come about in the case of polysemy. If the predicate *son of a bitch* had a figurative (laudatory) meaning, the humorous effect would not have arisen.³³

The meaning of pejoratives, indeed, does not change in re-addressed irony, but thanks to its dialogic quality, we can reverse the sign of the modus. If the predicate *son of a bitch* in Pushkin's utterance expressed re-addressed irony, like the predicate *idiot* in the title of Dostoevskii's novel, it would have been possible to "repair" the modus by ascribing to the statement the figurative meaning opposed to the direct meaning, that is, laudatory. This is what we usually do; but our implicature is incorrect. The meaning of pejoratives in jocular speech does not change to the opposite, but, contrary to Wierzbicka, neither does it remain the same – it simply disappears. Playful abuse has neither a literal nor a figurative meaning. From Bakhtin's works it follows that the issue is not one of praise (participants in a carnival had no reason to praise each other), but of play in which any norms, including those of language, are violated. The unconsciousness of such behavior, the speakers' total inability to understand their own intentions – this is why humor, unlike irony, conforms to the interactional rather than inferential model.

Disappearance of meaning and the ensuing ban on implicature and reply also take place in the case of the opposite semantic shift, which formally links humor to ordinary (not re-addressed) irony. In certain cases, a statement that is ironic in form expresses pleasure rather than disapproval: *This blind fiddler in a tavern / Playing Voi che sapete. Marvelous!*³⁴ Obviously, this is humor not irony. The interlocutor who is not in a joking mood can answer: *When Raphael's Madonnas are defiled / By worthless daubers, I do not find it funny.* But this is not an answer to the joke. A joke cannot be countered in the same way as a serious utterance can. One can restore the literal meaning of the utterance (*Yes,*

marvelous, if you please!) – suppose the fiddler played better than one would expect given his blindness and decrepitude. But this would be an answer to irony not to humor. As a reply to a joke, agreement in the form of ironic echoing would also be inappropriate: **Yeah, marvelous indeed...* In fact, this would express disagreement! Like seriousness, irony ignores humor and misses the mark; after all, the implicit meaning of the first remark (*Marvelous!*) was clearly not only that the fiddler's playing was bad. Nor, obviously, that it was good. As jocular abuse is neither abuse nor praise, so jocular praise is neither praise nor abuse. One cannot attribute to the utterance either a literal or a figurative meaning – and there is no third option.³⁵

Could it be that there are two opposite evaluations combined in a single word, one of them (the humorous) referring, in Nina Arutiunova's³⁶ terms, to the fact, that is, to the representation of reality in the subject's mind, and the other (the ironic) referring to the event, that is, to reality itself? Such cases, albeit without either irony or combined evaluation, are possible in serious speech: *It's good that I slept badly; otherwise I wouldn't have noticed that the wires had caught fire* (Arutiunova, 1998, p. 528). But nothing in Mozart's remark implies a similar coincidence. What then does he admire if not the fiddler's playing? We feel that the speaker is trying to express something important, which is beyond his interlocutor's understanding. The most amazing thing, however, is that his pleasure is not in the least feigned but quite sincere, as seen from the stage direction *Mozart laughs loudly*.³⁷

No exchange of thoughts has occurred, and the reason is simple: humor does not convey any thought. It conveys something opposed to thought in general rather than to a concrete thought: pleasure from play that can be termed only “the crash of language and culture.”

But no nonverbal communication has occurred either because the interlocutors were on different communicative planes. On different planes, not in different modes, as in the case of irony, which can easily be replaced by seriousness. This can't be helped; the only thing that remains is to observe politely, *Salieri, you seem out of sorts*. And even if both interlocutors were in a playful mood, words would be unnecessary – they would be superseded by laughter.

Note that Mozart's initial jocular remark was only an invitation to a pantomime with the participation of the fiddler. However, even in purely verbal genres like jokes the theatric element plays a huge role (Norrick, 2004). This fact is largely neglected by adherents of the semantic and linguistic theories of humor, who focus on transcribed texts and believe

that verbal humor is based on the oppositeness of scripts and on logical mechanisms. If this were so, humor would present no problem at all. The point of a joke is something that any normal schoolchild is able to understand and explain. Such explanations can be formalized (the purpose of this is not quite clear, though). However, the question of why humor gratifies us and why this pleasure is so different from other kinds of pleasure in outward expression is far more intriguing. As we have seen, the ostensible meaning of a joke and the meaning of humor are absolutely different, in fact unrelated things.

Humor is not simply incompatible with irony; it is capable of challenging irony. Mozart's exclamation (*Marvelous!*) is actually a parody of irony. This is even more obvious in the remark of a person who is being led to execution on a Monday: *Well, this week's beginning nicely!* (Freud, 1981/1905, p. 294; 1928; see preceding section). Freud supposes, and not without reason, that the man is joking, although from the joke itself we can more readily infer that he is being bitterly ironic (whether he is sincere or pretending is another matter). But whoever might be the source of this parody of irony – the joke's hero or its author, – what we see here is humor pure and simple. And when Lewis Carroll writes that *Alice had read several nice little stories about children who had got burnt, and eaten up by wild beasts,*³⁸ the words 'nice little' would prompt us to interpret the utterance as ironic, were it not for the parodic context, which unambiguously suggests that the author is pretending and that his intention is directly opposite because the outcome is humor – sick humor, in fact. The anonymous author of the nursery rhyme likewise parodies irony by means of sick humor: *Three wise men of Gotham / Went to sea in a bowl: / And if the bowl had been stronger / My song would have been longer.*³⁹ Irony is helpless in the face of humor, as is seriousness. A counterattack is hardly possible because humor interrupts verbal communication. In synchrony, it nearly always follows irony; the opposite sequence is an exception.⁴⁰

Humor is opposed not only to irony but to other tropes as well. One example is metaphor. Arutiunova (1998, p. 90) called metaphor "a victory over language." More likely it is a victory of language over itself. It only adds new force to language; meanwhile, language has a real opponent that deprives it of any force – humor. Rather than expanding the possibilities of language at the speech level as tropes do, humor attacks language from without by undermining any verbal tools. Metaphor, like irony, is no exception. Humor parodies metaphor, making it inappropriate by means of "realization" (aka "demetaphorization") – loss of figurative

meaning. Thus, in Dickens' *Dombey and Son* Mrs. Chick, *after forging this powerful chain of reasoning, remains silent for a minute to admire it*, and the following is said of Mrs. Skewton, whom the author repeatedly calls a Cleopatra tumbling into ruins: *As the ruin of Cleopatra tottered off whimpering...* In such cases we have a much greater reason to speak of a victory over language, but the winner is neither metaphor nor language but humor. Note that demetaphorization per se does not necessarily lead to lexical incompatibility and, in general, to an inappropriate and therefore a potentially humorous result. When used appropriately, this device enriches a metaphor. The raw material of humor, by contrast, is inappropriateness. Most often it is created by the author on purpose, and the reader needs only to discover the impropriety of the author's linguistic mask. But sometimes the interactants switch roles: the reader/hearer takes an active position and arbitrarily attributes a humorous intention to the author/speaker (Jean-Paul, 1973/1804, pp. 77-8); in other words, s/he sees the artificial impropriety when there is none.

The source of humor, then, does not lie in the incongruity or abnormality of the text (this is an objective linguistic criterion based on comparing the text with language norms), but in its inappropriateness, which is discovered by subjectively evaluating the gap between the text and what it "should be," that is, between the author and the implicit inferior narrator. Parody seeks to maximize this gap. One might argue that parody, too, is appropriate. True, but this is a different kind of appropriateness, and the difference accounts for humor. The text becomes potentially humorous whenever the author, rather than trying to find the best way of expressing something (irony is often the best way), prefers to demonstrate the worst way this can be done. Thereby the inapt "implicit narrator" enters the scene, and his position clashes with that of the author. Any humorous text, from a mediocre joke (in fact, from a single word like Mozart's *Marvelous!*) to entire pages in Dickens's novels, has this false bottom – the dual authorship.

Ideally, the subjective assessment of the appropriateness vs. inappropriateness of a text, based on a number of semantic and pragmatic criteria, should be the same for the addresser and the addressee. Vladimir Propp (1997, p. 225) even spoke of the "instinct of propriety." Actually, as evidenced by the acceptance vs. rejection not merely of avant-garde, but of any major literary work, this instinct is anything but universal. Thus, some readers may consider the texts of, say, Andrei Platonov parodic and funny both because of their abnormality (objective criterion) and because of the incorrect assessment of the writer's intention (subjective

criterion). But even such an extreme case only confirms the rule. As demonstrated, for instance, by *The City of Gradov*, Platonov understood perfectly what humor is, and clearly distinguished it from seriousness. The same applies to Dostoevskii, all his heteroglossia notwithstanding (Bakhtin, 1984/1963). The abnormality of his texts, resulting from a host of alien voices in the speech of his heroes and in his own, evidently did not appear inappropriate to him. But the parody of Turgenev in *The Demons* clearly demonstrates that humor as an artificially created inappropriateness does not dissolve in all this ironic polyphony and opposes seriousness no less sharply than in monoglossic texts.

Humor attacks language on all levels and in all ways – from primitive puns, which short-circuit sound and meaning, to jokes, in which insoluble absurdity lurks behind the elegant façade. Any verbal device is vulnerable to parody (Sannikov, 1999). Therefore all of them including irony are on one side of the demarcation line, whereas humor is on the other. Verbal devices rather than the communicative partners or referents (as in irony and satire),⁴¹ are the main targets for humor, and the main reason humor is enjoyed is victory over language.

In sum, the essence of humor when viewed from the metalevel rather than from the text level is the collapse of symbolic communication. This essence is incompatible with either conscious behavior or semantics. What is created consciously and what does have semantics is the artistic and structural setup of the collapse, the envelope of humor (superficial realism, “psychological veracity,” “wit,” “script oppositeness,” “logical mechanism,” etc.). Judging from the failures of psychoanalytic interpretations, the basic function of humor is likewise not to be found at the level of the unconscious – not, at least, that of the individual. Cognitivists, linking humor with insight, which furnishes a clue to jokes and cartoons, ignore the destructiveness hidden behind outward constructiveness. The behavior of two-year-old children purposely violating linguistic and cultural norms and laughing while doing so (Chukovsky, 1963, p. 601) is much closer to humor than solving puzzles. If humor were a mechanism for blocking incongruity, as Marvin Minsky (1984) claimed, then why should one generate this incongruity deliberately; why does playful destruction of meaning gratify us; and what accounts for the enormous sociality of humor (something that is altogether alien to irony)?

One of the possible hypotheses is that humor is a manifestation of conflict that is neither personal nor social, but evolutionary. It is a defense reaction; however, contrary to the widespread view, this reaction occurs neither at the individual level nor at the group level, but at the species

level. The evolutionary view of humor, a bird's eye view, can appear strange since this phenomenon has traditionally been considered from the perspective of personal and social conflicts. In the following section I will try to bring forwards arguments supporting my hypothesis.

3.5 Humor and Laughter as a Species Reaction

As noted above, not the slightest evidence of symbolic communication among primates (including apes) has been observed under natural conditions. The emergence of language was a "revolution in evolution," marking the transition from nature to culture. This event can be likened to throwing a railroad switch, thanks to which man's evolutionary path irreversibly diverged from the evolutionary paths of other living beings (Kozintsev, 2004). It is becoming more and more evident that it was not the brain which gradually created language by way of a long evolution, but language, having disrupted evolutionary continuity, created the human brain (see, e.g., Deacon, 1997, pp. 340, 349). There is no doubt that the key factor in this process was natural selection, the intensity of which was unusually great, judging by the amount of changes undergone by the brain in the course of human evolution.

The adaptive value of language and culture is obvious, but revolutions are seldom painless. A parallel between culture and captivity has been drawn more than once, but symbolization, which is a premise for culture, has always been viewed as a pure advantage. What makes us so attached to this belief is unclear. We should not forget that man is but a very late twig on the evolutionary tree of primates and, in terms of genealogy, is not opposed even to apes, let alone other anthropoids. In fact, man cannot be opposed even to his two closest African relatives – the gorilla and the chimpanzee. On the contrary, man and chimpanzee are genealogically opposed to the gorilla. Our affinity with our primate relatives, therefore, is close indeed.

Hence it follows that by whatever radical innovations human evolution was marked, the neuropsychological evolutionary load was (and presumably, remains) very substantial. Cognitive and communicative predispositions shared by all primates may be part of this load. They could not have disappeared without trace during the relatively short time (6-7 million years are indeed a short span on the evolutionary scale) separating us from the common ancestor of man and chimpanzee. Without resorting to teleology, it is hard to explain why this evolutionary heritage should be in complete harmony with a radically new system of transmitting and accumulating information. If the neurolinguist Ter-

rence Deacon is correct in calling language an “evolutionary anomaly,” a “colonizer,” and even a “parasite” of the brain, which was previously adapted for completely different purposes (Deacon, 1997, pp. 34, 111), then the reason for the evolutionary conflict is understandable.

A manifestation of this conflict, perhaps, is humor with its anti-linguistic and anti-cultural tendency (see section 2.4). Its connection with disorderly play is beyond doubt. Laughter, which is closely linked with humor (despite occasionally acquiring independence from humor), introduces here a strange element of explosiveness, which is generally not present in play (not to such a degree even in disorderly play). In terms of its energy human laughter is not comparable to the proto-laughter of apes (Provine, 2000, pp. 96-7, 124). Racking their brains about the function of this strange phenomenon and proposing the most diverse hypotheses,⁴² researchers have for some reason disregarded the most direct and obvious consequence of a peal of laughter – the disruption of speech. And yet, this is the sole physiological effect of laughter that has been firmly established. The idea that even a temporary disruption of the most important human function – speech – can be beneficial and can in fact be produced by a special physiological mechanism adapted for that purpose seems absurd at first glance. However, if one takes into account the possibility of an evolutionary conflict caused by language, there is nothing improbable about this.⁴³ In effect, given what cognitive linguists have written about the “disruption of reasoning” (Minsky, 1984) and the “disabling mechanism” (Chafe, 1987), the anti-linguistic nature of humor and laughter is staring us in the face.⁴⁴

“With Europeans hardly anything excites laughter so easily as mimicry,” observed Darwin (1872, p. 209), “and it is rather curious to find the same fact with the savages of Australia, who constitute one of the most distinct races in the world.” Imitation of speech abnormalities, which perhaps appears funnier than anything else to people of all ages and races, occupies a special place. The motivation for mimicry (the “target’s” mental or speech defect, drunkenness, foreign language or accent, local dialect, individual or social manner of speech, etc.) is unimportant; it is often completely absent in children, and they can clown and laugh for no apparent reason and without any target, although, of course, only in the presence of spectators. Therefore, the aggressive function of such behavior is secondary with regard to the playful one.

Contrary to a common delusion, nothing even remotely similar has been observed among nonhuman primates. Apes do not ape. Why then do humans do that, and why do they find it so gratifying? Clearly, this

is neither satire nor ostracism nor xenophobia. In all appearances, this is a purely human form of disorderly play. And it is not individuals or groups that laugh at one another. Rather, *Homo sapiens*, a member of an evolutionarily young primate taxon, radically elevated above other living beings thanks to language, but still a primate, looks at himself from the metalevel and senses his profound duality at the level of the collective unconscious. Then, in momentary play, he distorts his cultural guise, parodies language (language at large, a capacity underlying man's uniqueness), and laughs at himself, as if temporarily abandoning language and regressing to a natural condition through laughter. Imitation of animals, which likewise seems extremely funny to us (one more proof of the nonaggressive function of mimicry and the optionality of its "target") has, evidently, the same meaning.

There is, then, a reason to suppose that the original function of laughter as a metacommunicative signal of negativistic play (this function is shared by all primates) has been supplemented by a secondary function present only in man: temporary disruption of speech. It is quite possible that in the course of evolution this function became no less important than the original one. If we recall the Saussurean *langue/parole* opposition, we will discover a striking parallelism: laughter is as opposed to speech as humor is to language. Humor destroys the semantic (psychological) aspect of linguistic signs, whereas laughter destroys their acoustic (physical) aspect. Accordingly, we have every reason to consider humor and laughter two interrelated manifestations of the same phenomenon, which Marina Borodenko has called anti-sign. The revolt, of which Pierre Guiraud (1976, p. 112) wrote with regard to what he termed "defunctionalization" of language, is evidently aimed against something much more important than just stereotypes.

Our hypothesis provides a clue to the connection between humor and pleasure. What gratifies us is not the supposed meaning of a humorous text (hardly anyone except Freudians would venture to assert that sick humor or nonsense humor attracts us by its meaning); on the contrary, it is the destruction of meaning, which is achieved not only by the illegitimate use of linguistic devices, but mainly by undermining reference (see section 3.3).⁴⁵ Loss of meaning, the repudiation (or defunctionalization) of language, is the keynote of humor, its true and sole "semantic mechanism."

This idea, at first glance, contradicts the authoritative view of Paul McGhee: humor is but a side effect of language (McGhee, 1979, pp. 102-3, 121-3). A disagreement with neuropsychological data also appears

to arise. A person in whom only the left (“speaking”) hemisphere functions does not get the point of a humorous text, although s/he laughs; if only the right (“mute”) hemisphere is intact, the person gets the point, but does not laugh (see section 2.1).

On close inspection, however, the contradiction proves spurious. The left hemisphere controls only the plane of expression of linguistic signs, whereas the plane of content is in the right hemisphere. Perhaps freeing words from the burden of meaning, that is, turning them into empty envelopes, brings relief, the more so because in this case the person is even unaware of his/her illness.⁴⁶ By contrast, meaning, deprived of the possibility to be embodied in word, becomes an excessive burden for the one who understands, who has spoken, but is no longer able to speak.

It would, of course, be a gross simplification to conclude that humor is a function of the left, purely “human” hemisphere. This idea is refuted by the functional continuity between the proto-laughter of apes and human laughter. But it would evidently be a no lesser mistake to claim, as certain authors do, that the principal role in the perception of humor is played by the right hemisphere (see section 2.1). The “groundless” laughter of a person in whom only the left hemisphere functions, his/her ability to laugh at anything without getting the point can amaze us, but it should not be overlooked that in this laughter the fundamental principle of humor, “sweet madness,” descent to the “foolish” worldview, is realized and carried to the extreme.⁴⁷

Indeed, no standards of the laughable exist. An understanding of what we call the “point” and to what we ascribe the key role in the mechanism of humor for no particular reason is not only insufficient but also unnecessary either for amusement or for laughter. Since the comic, according to Jean Paul, “never resides in the object, but in the subject” (see chapter 1), the perception of humor is based not so much on “understanding” something objectively present in the stimulus as on interpreting that stimulus.⁴⁸ In fact, under experimental conditions normal people can laugh at bona fide texts (Cunningham and Derks, 2005), though this, obviously, cannot be considered normal.

By contrast, the inability (or unwillingness) to laugh, as it happens when the left hemisphere is disabled, can attest to nothing else but the disappearance of the sense of humor. This loss cannot be compensated for by the preservation of reason, specifically, by the ability to get the point. Moreover, the “seriousness” of the right hemisphere may be caused precisely by its inability to spare man the dictates of reason. By shifting the accent from the plane of content of the linguistic signs to the plane of

expression, the left hemisphere possibly brings about this deliverance; for, according to Kant, it is the play with empty mental representations that makes us laugh.

One can't help but relate these considerations to the idea of the anti-referential function of language (see section 3.3). Possibly, humor puts language "in neutral": the left hemisphere, which is concerned with language, temporarily acquires independence from the right; the linguistic signs are deprived of the plane of content; consequently, the hard-won plane of expression turns into material for idle and thoughtless play. No other beings except man, of course, are capable of this because they lack the appropriate material for it. Inter-hemispheric discoordination leads to the cortical disinhibition and to the involuntary eruption of the ancient subcortical metacommunicative signal, which even today has the same "anti-semantic" meaning that it had in man's ancestors: "I'm violating the norm, but don't take my behavior seriously!" Clearly, all these are only guesses. Their verification is a task for the future.

The basic hypothesis is this: the cause of the gelotic euphoria is neither the triumph of justice nor *schadenfreude* nor the rise in social status nor the "removal of censorship" nor the "economy in the expenditure of affect" (at least, not only that), but first and foremost the eruption of a latent protest of human (or rather primate) nature against symbolization, which is unconsciously perceived as a burden. Humor is a short-lived playful rebellion against symbolization, nature's temporary revenge in its rivalry with culture. By "defunctionalizing" language, that is, by freeing it from the referential function, humor frees us from language. Nothing else can adequately explain pleasure from humor, and only the intensity of this pleasure shows how burdensome for us, primates, is the symbolic communication to which we have grown so accustomed in the course of evolution. Only laughter shows that language, which we are used to regarding as something like our skin, is in fact mere clothing, which is quite possible to take off. Of course, only for a while and only at play.

The conflict here occurs at a much deeper level than in irony. This is especially noticeable in the behavior of young children, who laugh while intentionally violating the linguistic and cultural norms they have just acquired. In adult humor, especially contemporary humor with its quasi-realism and elaborate structure, secondary conflicts (personal and social) completely shield from us the primary conflict – the evolutionary one. Though, in essence, adults laugh for the same reasons as children.

If so, we can speak of a third function of laughter: it has become an independent source of gratification. Although we have grown used to con-

sidering laughter merely a “reflection” of humor, in everyday discourse only an insignificant number of laughter episodes can be considered a reaction to jokes and witticisms (Provine, 2000, p. 43). The rest are associated with trifling remarks, intonations, and gestures. But even when telling jokes, adults, like children, sometimes begin laughing before the punchline. The difference between adults and children is not that children “do not understand” humor,⁴⁹ but that adults try to tame their laughter and to confine it within the bounds of cultural convention, although they do not always succeed. In essence, we must acknowledge the correctness of Kant’s observation: humor is only a pretext for laughter.

This calls into question our habitual idea of humor as the signified and laughter as the signifier. That’s how it really was in our evolutionary past: laughter was merely a sign which meant that violation of the norm is harmless. However, during cultural evolution the signifier and the signified apparently switched places. Laughter, having grown infinitely stronger than it used to be, became an end in itself, a source of gratification independent of humor, and thus something requiring a sign. The role of the signifier of laughter was assumed by humor, which has turned into a mere pretext for laughter, its sign. As in language, the connection between the signifier and the signified eventually became almost arbitrary and conventional. Similarly to the way they acquire the rules of language, which arbitrarily connect sounds with meanings, children acquire the cultural rule that one is supposed to laugh at the end of a joke.

Linguists, who study what they call the “semantics of humor” and analyze humorous texts as if they were serious texts, largely disregard this. Despite acknowledging that humor belongs to the non-bona fide mode, most theorists still remain at the text level, focusing on the ostensible meanings of jokes and being reluctant to switch to the metalevel. The pragmatics of humor, however, is much more important than its semantics. The very existence of the latter is extremely doubtful. This is what Jean Paul (1773/1804, p. 80) had in mind when he wrote that absurdities which normally annoy us seem laughable if we attribute humorous intention to their creators and join the disorderly play – real (when we speak of “the comic in art”) or imaginary (when we speak of “funniness in life.”) The rationale of humor lies outside the humorous text or a life situation. It is within us. All their artistic qualities notwithstanding, jokes and comedies, like archaic rites of renewal, may be mere signals for a playful revolt, inviting us to forget about linguistically encoded cultural meanings for a while and to play the fool (or the ape?) instead. The fact

that one signal is preferred to another in a specific cultural context is important, but it does not concern the basic meaning of the signal; nor does it cancel its arbitrariness.

Mimicking a behavior perceived as incongruous is peculiar only to man. In irony this takes place on the conscious and mostly verbal level because irony is a by-product of language. Language is used here according to its direct purpose, and there is no defunctionalization, no loss of reference, no fooling around. Like language and unlike humor, irony has no direct evolutionary precursors. In ontogeny, too, it appears much later than humor (see section 3.4).

Humor, by contrast, is largely unconscious and is not limited to verbal behavior. Language here is deprived of its referential function and is thus directed against itself. The contagiousness of laughter creates an intimate interpersonal relationship, which irony lacks. The reason is obvious: irony, like satire, seeks to demarcate individuals and groups, while humor, despite all the multitude of its quasi-meanings and styles, expresses the unity of mankind as a species in the face of a unique problem with which this species is confronted.

Notes

- 1 I use the term “symbol” in the sense which C.S. Peirce gave it: a sign which is based on convention rather than on an inherent connection with, or resemblance to, the object.
- 2 Nikolai Yevreinov (1879-1953) – Russian theatre director, dramatist, and theorist. His book *Theatre Among the Animals: On the Biological Meaning of Theatricality* appeared in 1924.
- 3 Desmond Morris (born 1928) – British zoologist, ethologist, and surrealist painter, one of the pioneers in the study of chimpanzee “painting”. His book *The Biology of Art* was published in 1962.
- 4 Rendered into English verse by Alfred Hayes. Project Gutenberg. <http://www.gutenberg.org/etext/5089> [Trans. note].
- 5 Compare the definitions proposed by Marina Borodenko (1995, p. 75): “Whereas play can be defined as an activity aimed at creating values and manipulating them on a conventional plane, the comic is an activity directed at the destruction of values, though also on a conventional plane.” In my opinion, one should not oppose the comic to play “at large,” but serious play (which creates meanings) to facetious play of the peek-a-boo type (ibid., p. 73; see sections 2.2, 2.3) which, as Borodenko correctly writes (ibid.), is “for fun”; that is, it destroys meanings and is basically similar to other forms of nonserious behavior. The only meaning which is created and acquired thanks to such behavior is the meaning of laughter as a metacommunicative sign: “Don’t take this seriously!”
6. Granted, certain psychiatrists, especially psychoanalysts, did mention parallels between humor and neurosis (Elitzur, 1990a, b; see section 1.4). However mirthless laughter is aberrant; it is sometimes even viewed as “parasitic” with regard to normal laughter (Pfeifer, 1994). Bateson’s follower William Fry had a good reason to title his book on humor *Sweet Madness* (Fry, 1963). Denying that laughter is

- normally related to pleasure runs contrary not only to common sense, but to neurophysiological facts as well (see section 2.1).
7. An exclamation summoning others to join a boys' game the object of which is to make as large a pile of people as possible. Players throw those standing down onto those already on the ground and attempt to keep those on the ground from getting up. A player may also throw himself on the pile. For Americans the most familiar image may be that of football players piling on a downed ball carrier. [*Trans. note*].
 8. That imitation of the elements had survived the archaic epoch and Classical mime shows for centuries and was practiced in our folk culture till very recently is attested by an excellent scene in Aleksandr Kuprin's largely documentary novel *Yama (The Pit)*, where a drunkard masterfully depicts a thunderstorm for money. One of the things that seemed funniest to me in my childhood was a TV sketch where viewers were given a chance to behold what listeners were supposed only to hear: the imitation of a storm on a radio broadcast. [*Trans. note*: Imitation of the elements is still with us. A production called *Slava's Snowshow* was presented at the Helen Hayes Theatre on Broadway 2 December 2008 through 4 January 2009. Slava is Slava Polunin, the famous Russian clown].
 9. According to Martha Wolfenstein, children already in their second year acquire the ability to distinguish "serious make-believe," where the similarity between fantasy and reality is in the foreground, and "joking make-believe," where the disagreement between fantasy and reality is emphasized (Wolfenstein, 1954, pp. 52, 56). The same view with regard to the development of children's humor was expressed by Paul McGhee (1979, pp. 60-3).
 10. "A man experiences the full intensity of subjective terror when a spear is flung at him out of the 3D screen or when he falls headlong from some peak created in his own mind in the intensity of nightmare. At the moment of terror there is no questioning of 'reality,' but still there was no spear in the movie house and no cliff in the bedroom. The images did not denote that which they seemed to denote, but these same images did really evoke that terror which would have been evoked by a real spear or a real precipice" (Bateson, 2000/1972, p. 183). Bateson admits that this situation is radically different from that with the play fighting of animals (and, we may add, with humor); but instead of acknowledging the qualitative difference between the orderly and the disorderly play, he digresses into Freudian reasoning.
 11. Iurii Lotman (1967, II.3.0.2) called Pushkin's line "*Nad vymyslom slezami obol'ius*" ("I'll cry over my fantasy again" from Pushkin's "Elegy," 1830, trans. by Alec Vagapov) "a brilliant characteristic of the dual nature of artistic behavior": "It would seem that recognition of the fact that we are dealing with fantasy should preclude tears. Or the opposite: the feeling provoking tears should force us to forget that we are dealing with fantasy. Actually, both mutually opposed types of behavior coexist and enhance each other."
 12. "*T'my nizkikh istin mne dorozhe/ Nas vozvyshaiushchii obman*" (from Pushkin's poem "The Hero," 1830) [*Trans. note*].
 13. Photographs of these monuments can be seen at <http://www.saint-petersburg.com/monuments/peter-1st-mikhail-shemiakin.asp> and <http://www.saint-petersburg.com/monuments/alexander-3rd.asp> [*Trans. note*].
 14. Vasilii Ivanovich Chapaev was the legendary Red Army commander during the Civil War. Both the novel *Chapaev*, written by Dmitrii Furmanov, and the film under the same name, directed by the Vasiliev Brothers, were extremely popular. Later, Chapaev became hero of a no less popular joke cycle.
 15. The question arises: in what world of reference does the hero of Viktor Pelevin's postmodernist novel *Chapaev and the Void* (its English translation is titled *Buddha's*

Little Finger) live? If we believe the author, who calls his novel “the first work in world literature the action of which takes place in the absolute void,” then we should speak of a special – fourth – world. But there is no such world. Action cannot take place in the absolute void. What takes place in the void is “play with representations of the understanding by which nothing is thought” (Kant). If so, this would be the third world of reference. But is Pelevin’s novel devoid of meaning? Do we really feel duped and laugh while reading it? In some places, maybe; and still with all the might of his talent the author forces us to believe in the reality of his ghostly hero – after all, we do believe in the ghost of Hamlet’s father or in the dead Countess who appears to Hermann in Pushkin’s *Queen of Spades*. Imagination knows no bounds, and therefore in the case of Pelevin, too, one must admit that we have before us one of the possible worlds – the second world of reference, where even such a Chapaev has permission to reside. In this sense Pelevin is closer to Furmanov [who wrote the novel *Chapaev*] and the Vasiliev Brothers [who directed the film *Chapaev*] than to authors of Chapaev jokes. It is possible, however, that many readers do not yield to the illusion and place Pelevin’s Chapaev in the third world of reference and laugh – or slam the book shut in annoyance without finishing it.

16. A three-volume collection of “memorates and fabulates,” published by Iurii Borev in 1995-96.
17. *Satirikon* was a popular humor magazine published by Arkadii Averchenko in St. Petersburg (1908-18). *World History Retold by “Satirikon”* (1911) was written by Tefi (Nadezhda Lokhvitskaia), Osip Dymov (Iosif Perelman), Arkadii Averchenko, and D’Or (Iosif Orsher) [*Trans. note*].
18. Stirlitz is the assumed name of the hero of a series of espionage novels by Iulian Semenov. The novel *Seventeen Moments in Spring*, in which Stirlitz, a Soviet spy in the Nazi High Command, is tasked with finding out which of the Nazis is interested in concluding a separate peace with the Western allies, was turned into a popular TV series in the early 1970s. Stirlitz is the subject of an enormous body of jokes and is probably as well known among Russians as is James Bond among the British. [*Trans. note*]
19. In the words of Evgenii Sokolov, “before all the Derridian passions, the Soviet joke with delightful insidiousness demonstrated the utmost futility of logocentric dictate” (Sokolov, 2002, p. 123).
20. Wayne Booth observed that people claiming that “all literature is ironic” sometimes fail to understand the most ordinary irony (Booth 1974, p. 1), which, psychologically, is easy to explain. This was experimentally demonstrated by the American physicist Alan Sokal, who wrote a parody on the works of deconstructivists. In it he asserted that physical reality was a social and linguistic construct; that physical constants were in fact variables, etc. The deconstructivists took the bait and published the article in their journal “Social Text.” When Sokal publicly admitted that he had been joking, his admission provoked confusion and anger in the deconstructivist camp (Lingua Franca, 2000). While Sokal’s text, of course, is ironic rather than humorous, the lesson of the story is that those who deny the difference between seriousness and nonseriousness are unable to be consistent.
21. Marina Borodenko (1995, p. 74) writes about the conventional as a common source of the comic and of serious play. This is true on the level of ontogeny and corresponds to two types of make-believe among young children, according to Martha Wolfenstein, – “joking make-believe” and “serious make-believe.” In phylogeny, however, disorderly play appears far earlier than the conventional and the comic. Orderly play appears simultaneously with these two (like orderly play, the conventional and the comic are coeval with language and culture), but it is unrelated to the disorderly playful roots of the pure comic.

22. Attardo points to the difference between such paracommunicative signs and the metacommunicative ones like laughter. The former are parallel to what is said (i.e., they are as ironic as irony itself), whereas the latter are orthogonal to what is said and, as in the case of laughter, can contradict words.
23. The modus, according to Charles Bally (1965/1932, § 32) indicates the act of thought whereas the dictum indicates the representation performed by such an act (Graffi, 2001, p. 248). Modus is also called modality, and dictum is also called proposition. In the sentence "*I think the accused is innocent*" "I think" is modus (modality), and "the accused is innocent" is dictum (proposition). While the modus is necessarily always present, it is often implicit. "*The accused is innocent*" implies "*(I think that) the accused is innocent.*"
24. An exception occurs when the incongruity between the object and its ironic evaluation is "corrected" by referring to another object. The resulting utterance has a direct meaning and, formally, is inappropriate rather than ironic: *I love people who signal!* (when said about a driver who has failed to signal – an example from Hutcheon, 1994, p. 62; see Attardo, 2001a, for further discussion). Even such a roundabout maneuver does not generate any semantic problems.
25. The observation that Christ did not laugh is repeated at every turn, as if there were something strange in it and as if the Gospel were replete with the comic. But a much less trivial fact – the lack of inclination for laughter in Socrates's case – is for some reason neglected, although this is far more noteworthy, as irony has been traditionally considered a subtype of the comic.
26. "True irony is a shy maiden," wrote Friedrich Klopstock, "who goes all out to keep from laughing with you. She is best when not only a ninny, but also any clever person thinks that she seriously means what she says" (Klopstock, 1774, p. 150).
27. In the Russian example, the noun *pogodka* ("weather") has a diminutive suffix (-k-). Wierzbicka (1992, p. 412) notes that Russian diminutive nouns and adjectives sometimes express an unspecified and free-floating "good feeling," not necessarily oriented toward the referent (*Chto noven'kogo?* means 'What's the news?' said by someone in a cheerful mood). This may account for the frequent use of diminutives in Russian ironically approving utterances, which accordingly express not only the speaker's disapproval but also his/her discontent. The diminutive designation of the object creates an air of irony even if the negative evaluation has a literal meaning (*Otvratitel'naia pogodka!* 'Disgusting weather!' To render this "built-in predicate" and thus to preserve the ironic mode in the English translation one would need an oxymoron like 'Jolly disgusting weather!').
28. Inappropriate utterances are marked by asterisks.
29. Cf.: "The narrator shouts into Golyadkin's ear Golyadkin's own words and thoughts, but in another, hopelessly alien, hopelessly censoring and mocking tone." (Bakhtin, 1984/1963, p. 221; the passage refers to Dostoevskii's *Double*).
30. The first sentence is from Dostoevskii's letter to Sofia Ivanovna of September 1/13, 1868; the second sentence, also referring to *Don Quixote*, is from *A Writer's Diary*, March, 1876.
31. The sentence is from Pushkin's letter to Petr Viazemskii of November 1825 and refers to the completion of *Boris Godunov*.
32. At first sight, such addressless statements disagree with the pragmatics of irony as a means of dispute and persuasion. Their purport would be easier to understand if we consider that irony has an independent aesthetic function. This function creates the effect of the "inertia of discontent" whereby the speaker extends his negative attitude from the object of evaluation to someone unspecified, to whom the opposite evaluation is attributed. If so, Sperber and Wilson's "mention theory" holds, but

- citation becomes virtual. Clark and Gerrig (1984) believe that such cases evidence pretense rather than echoing.
33. This effect disappears to the extent that the direct meaning is displaced by a figurative one, cf. idioms based on reverse speech such as *Break a leg!* or Russian *Ni pukha, ni pera!*; literally, '[May you bag] neither fur nor feathers' (see section 2.4).
 34. *Slepoi skrypach v traktire / Razygryval voi che sapete. Chudo* From Scene 1 of Pushkin's drama *Mozart and Salieri*, translated by Alan Shaw. *Voi che sapete* are the first three words of Cherubino's sarietta, No. 11 from Act II of *The Marriage of Figaro*. The first line is "Voi che sapete che cosa è amor" ('You who know what love is.') [Trans. note].
 35. Traditional references to the "geniality" and "humaneness" of humor lead nowhere. Examples of bureaucraticese of the type "You can't invent that on purpose" [*Narochno ne pridumaesh'* – a column title in the Soviet humor magazine *Krokodil*] can evoke no less uproarious laughter.
 36. Nina Davidovna Arutiunova (born 1923). One of the leading Russian specialists in the logical analysis of language.
 37. The real Mozart went further. He not only enjoyed incongruity, but created it himself: recall his *Musical Joke*.
 38. *Alice in Wonderland*, chapter I, "Down the Rabbit Hole" [Trans. note].
 39. In the same manner, bitterly ironical remarks of the donkey Eeyore in *Winnie the Pooh* acquire a humorous meaning in the context of the novel.
 40. Ironic remarks such as *Ha-ha-ha! How funny!* in effect, express the helplessness of the laugher's serious partner, although crying sometimes can be stopped by serious or ironic arguments. The reason is that in the latter case both interactants are on one communicative plane (seriousness), whereas the spontaneity of laughter pulls the laugher off the plane of serious discourse. Therefore appealing to his/her common sense is useless. In this respect, laughter is closer to yawning, the hiccups or sneezing than to crying.
 41. Satire, which, like irony, is often conflated with humor under one hyperonym – the comic, – is no less vulnerable to humor. It serves its purposes only insofar as it is inherently serious. But any political joke is but a parody on satire, leveled not against the referents but against language. Strangely, most researchers, let alone lay people, fail to notice this false bottom, and this is what Olga Freidenberg (1973a/1925, p. 497) implied when she wrote that ancient parody of the gods ridicules "not them but solely us, and does this so skillfully that we still take it for comedy, imitation, or satire."
 42. The popular idea that humor and laughter are beneficial for the organism has received no convincing confirmation (Martin, 2004; 2007, pp. 309-33). The only documented fact is that humor psychologically eases suffering and, in particular, elevates the capacity to tolerate pain. Laughter per se does not produce this effect. As to humor, there is nothing peculiar about it in this respect, since the same effect is produced by all positive emotions and in part even by negative ones insofar as they distract from pain (Martin, 2007, pp. 324-5). Contrary to most sociobiological explanations, the evolutionary benefits of laughter and humor must be sought on the group level rather than on the individual level (Gervais, Wilson, 2005). Individual variations in universal human capacities such as bipedality, speech, laughter, and humor are irrelevant to their evolutionary value for *Homo sapiens*.
 43. There are, by the way, two other enigmatic physiological mechanisms that may have the same speech-disrupting function – crying and yawning (Kozintsev, Butovskaya, 1999).
 44. The psychoanalyst Harvey Mindess (1971, pp. 85-90), too, has written about humor as liberation from language. But in his book language is lost among manifold psy-

- chological hardships, individual and social. In addition, he attributed the liberating role only to puns.
45. In a Mother Goose rhyme, a wise man who scratched out his eyes in a bramble bush jumps into another bush and scratches them in again. Nonsense and sick humor are not the exotic periphery but, on the contrary, the center, where the properties of humor are especially manifest. (There was a man in our town/And he was wond'rous wise; /He jumped into a bramble bush/And scratched out both his eyes./And when he saw his eyes were out,/With all his might and main/He jumped into another bush/And scratched them in again! [*Trans. note*]).
 46. Likewise, drunks have no sense of their own inadequacy. People intoxicated by alcohol show more readiness to find blunt humor funny, whereas subtle humor does not amuse them (Weaver et al., 1985). Deciphering sophisticated jokes requires mental effort (in fact, a certain degree of seriousness) and thus disagrees with the basic principle of humor – “comic degradation.” “Overly sober” people may prefer sophisticated puzzles rather than jokes since they don’t need to laugh. Therefore Bergson and Freud had every reason to compare the comic with alcohol. The effect of nitrous oxide, apparently, is the same – lowering the “funniness threshold,” i.e., increasing the readiness to be amused by primitive stimuli.
 47. I can foresee that this idea will exasperate many readers, who know absolutely that the sense of humor is one of the noblest human characteristics. In no way arguing with these readers, in fact, fully agreeing with them, I would only suggest they recall Kant’s idea that the cause of laughter is play with representations of the understanding by which ultimately nothing is thought. The contradiction is spurious! If laughter is temporary liberation, then the sense of humor can serve to measure the significance of what we are momentarily liberated from and to which we return after laughing.
 48. Postmodernists assert that this is true of any text. By agreeing with them, we would have admitted that humor as an independent phenomenon does not exist (for more detail, see Pye, 2006). In this case the function of laughter would be incomprehensible.
 49. Cognitive development perfects orderly play, but takes us further and further away from the sources of disorderly play. Two-year-old children, who have barely mastered speech, are no less capable of understanding the nature of humor than adults, judging from the elation with which they play with words. Adults, on the other hand, look for roundabout ways, and head-on attacks against language do not make them happy any more. One of these roundabout ways is jokes. The capacity to understand them appears in children relatively late (as, incidentally, does irony; see section 3.4). This capacity in no way brings us closer to the core of humor. In fact, cognitive development can even hinder the perception of humor. Thus, “overly intelligent,” and therefore serious, children do not laugh at cartoons. Displaying a great deal of ingenuity, children reinterpret them in a realistic fashion, stubbornly refusing to assimilate absurdity and to switch from the stimulus level to the meta-level (Bariaud, 1983, pp. 134-54, 208-9). They understand everything except why one should imitate “inferior people.” Isn’t this the main reason behind the chronic failures of the cognitive and semantic theories of humor?

4

Culture versus Nature

4.1 Emotions, Reflexes, Symbols

Presymbolic communicative means, laughter among them, are part of “evolutionary memory,” linking man’s behavior with that of his ancestors. To avoid confusion we will not call them “language” but will use this term only with reference to symbolic systems.

The key problem facing nonverbal semiotics, which seeks to describe and interpret bodily expressions, is that there is a clear division between language and the communications systems of animals, whereas differentiating symbolic and nonsymbolic nonverbal signs is anything but easy. The fundamental property of language – the arbitrariness of the sign and its subordination to voluntary control – does not extend to what is traditionally described as “the expression of the emotions.” On the other hand, many nonverbal signs which have become paralinguistic (gestures, emblems) originated from these bodily expressions. The ancient preverbal communication system, having been largely relegated to the background but not completely abolished by language, and having fallen within the sphere of its influence, has absorbed everything that language has discarded as it developed. Paralinguistic signs derived from the surviving remnants of this ancient system do not always suit the functions dictated by culture. Herein lies their radical distinction from actual linguistic signs, which have no claims to independence. The paralanguage of modern humans is both language and nonlanguage. It is an almost indivisible conglomerate of arbitrary signs (symbols) and presymbolic nonarbitrary signs which constantly switch from a language mode based on voluntary control to a prelinguistic mode (ancient and autonomous).

Semioticians classify nonverbal signs in terms of the degree to which they are subject to voluntary control (the distinction is quantitative, not

qualitative) and draw a rather artificial line between “physiological acts” (reflexes) and “gestures.” Laughter, smiling, crying, and yawning fall in the intermediate zone for which two systems of motor control – the pyramidal and the evolutionarily more ancient extrapyramidal – compete as does the autonomic nervous system. Depending on which of them gains the upper hand, a pattern is either more spontaneous (reflexive) or more voluntary and thus potentially gestural (linguistic).

Besides, owing to the feedback between facial expression and the cerebral cortex (see section 2.2), the connection is two-way – efferent (from a mental state to an “expression,” according to Darwin’s theory) and afferent (from bodily change to a mental state, according to William James’s theory). These theories underlie the two opposed systems of acting – those of Konstantin Stanislavsky and Vsevolod Meyerhold. If it is true that culture is serious, or “orderly” play (see section 3.1), the meaning of these systems extends far beyond the bounds of theatre. What really mattered for people of the archaic cultures was the “biomechanics,” in Meyerhold’s sense, that is, outward behavior rather than the underlying psychological state (“taking on a role,” according to Stanislavsky). Therefore Meyerhold turned to the archaic layers of behavior, whereas Stanislavsky was interested in his contemporaries, people of the post-traditional culture with their “hamletism” – hypertrophy of feeling and thinking to the detriment of action.¹ It is also easy to note the connection between these systems of play and contrasting types of personality – the extrovert and the introvert, and two types of cultures – the collectivist and the individualist, respectively.

According to Valentin Voloshinov (or Bakhtin?), “It is not experience that organizes expression, but the other way around – expression organizes experience” (Vološinov, 1986/1929, p. 85). This can be applied both to language, in the spirit of the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis, and to presymbolic communicative means, in the spirit of William James’s theory of the emotions. In ethology the idea that all bodily expressions are innate social signals has gained ground. Ethologically oriented psychologists, Alan Fridlund in particular, call for the rejection of the concept “emotion” (whenever individuals and groups compete for resources, aimlessly displaying one’s mental states is selectively disadvantageous) and attribute all nonverbal manifestations to paralanguage (Fridlund, 1994, pp. 291, 296, 302). This theory is illustrated perfectly by the famous remark of a young girl quoted in Kornei Chukovsky’s book *From Two to Five*: “I’m not crying to you, but to Aunt Sima.”

According to Fridlund, what has been traditionally described as the attempt to disguise emotion is not the struggle of pretense with sincer-

ity, but the conflict of two motives and, accordingly, signals. What distinguishes them is the degree to which they are subjected to cortical control (and, accordingly, to volition and language). However, because all motives and all signals, facial displays in particular, are equally communicative, it makes no sense to divide them into “genuine” and “feigned.” Hence it follows that there is no such thing as a personal self in and for itself – there is only a social self, a self for others (Fridlund, 1994, pp. 128-31). Or, in Jungian terms, *anima* does not exist; only *persona*, a social mask, exists.

This is consonant with Durkheim, Mauss, Bakhtin, Vygotskii, Buber, and, undoubtedly, Marx (cf. Thesis VI on Feuerbach: “The human essence is no abstraction inherent in each single individual. In its reality it is the ensemble of the social relations.”). However, our biological ancestors were already highly collectivistic animals, and only the conventionality of sign has established a qualitative boundary in evolution – the appearance of culture and a cultural role or rather a multitude of cultural roles.

Indeed, if play is communication, and if man, unlike other beings, permanently plays a certain role, then any outward manifestation of human “nature,” which was purely physiological in our ancestors, acquires a communicative function in modern man. Examples are sneezing (Bogdanov, 2001, pp. 180-227) and yawning (Seuntjens, 2004; see the website www.baillement.com). Moreover, there are reasons to believe that the contagiousness of yawning (as well as laughter and crying) is far from accidental and has a direct bearing on communication (Porshnev, 1974, pp. 289, 333-4, 350; Provine, 1997; Kozintsev and Butovskaya, 1999).

Any autonomic reflex having an outward manifestation can spread either by selection or by habit, and, accordingly, become communicative. One example is vascular reactions. Thus, the ability to blush is advantageous if considered an attribute of shame (Schmidt and Cohn, 2001).² This reflex cannot be imitated by voluntary effort, but one can voluntarily get into the corresponding emotional state – and according to Stanislavsky (and Darwin), “taking on a role” suffices for its physiological correlates to occur. One may assume that whenever there is no cultural demand for certain reflexes and, moreover, when these reflexes are taboo, they become less frequent and can eventually disappear.

This, however, is pure guesswork, and not a single question has been answered. Why, for instance, does nineteenth century literature abound with mentions of characters suddenly going pale, whereas such mentions

are much rarer in twentieth century literature? Is it perhaps that we have for some reason become less observant? But such an explanation does not apply to another vascular reaction leading to a very conspicuous consequence – fainting. Why do we faint less often than did people of the century before last? Anyway, it appears that discussing such facts in terms of “sincerity” and “pretense” is unproductive.³ Man always plays a role prescribed by a specific culture. People who shed abundant tears in the Age of Sentimentalism were hardly more sincere than their ancestors who simulated crying by means of an onion and saliva (see Pushkin’s *Boris Godunov*) or their descendants who lived in the age of the early cinema and used glycerin for this purpose. Physiology does not create a role; rather, it adapts itself to the role.

When speaking of the “emotionality” of archaic people, we forget about the social regulation of behavior, about the conventionality of gestural signs. Even Marcel Mauss, who first paid attention to this, titled his 1921 article “The Obligatory Expression of Feelings” (Garces and Jones, 2009), although, strictly speaking, only imitation can be obligatory. However, imitation of laughter and crying, in particular in rites, could affect the mental state of subjects even when an occasion for it was lacking (see next section).

At the same time, the antagonism between the two communicative systems – the ancient and the new – cannot escape notice either. In adapting ancient biological functions to its own purposes (trying to incorporate them or at least to explain them), language occasionally runs into an invisible and insuperable barrier. Certain reflexes are completely opaque. They lead a life of their own, which is not clear to us,⁴ and their images in naïve worldviews of different ages and cultures are variable and fantastic, and have nothing to do with their real meaning (Kozintsev and Kreidlin, 2005).

As long as we discuss physiological minutiae like sneezing, yawning, and hiccupping, the cultural role of which is minor, this discrepancy does not cause problems either for lay people or for experts. Hardly any of the latter will succumb to superstitions and believe, for example, that a sneezing, yawning, or hiccupping person is possessed by spirits. However, Wolter Seuntjens, the author of an exhaustive study on yawning, in which meticulously collected, but rather sketchy and contradictory data from the natural sciences are overwhelmed by a sea of folklore and literary material, is convinced that yawning is “actually” a sexual signal (Seuntjens, 2004). In the modern naïve worldview, incidentally, the same function is sometimes attributed to sneezing (see: Bogdanov, 2001, p.

211, for references). The sexual role of laughter is well-known and is confirmed both by uncountable ethnographic, folkloric, and literary data and by ethological observations on males and females (Grammer, 1990). But while Karl Grammer, being an ethologist, is well aware of the basic playfully negativistic function of laughter and correctly regards its role in sexual play as secondary, certain folklore scholars believe that precisely the sexual aspect reveals “the nature of laughter” (Zazykin, 2007).⁵

The semantics of laughter is an immeasurably more important issue than that of sneezing, yawning, and hiccupping because laughter plays a major role in culture. It is neither a physiological triviality nor a reflex but an important element of nonverbal communication which is part of our evolutionary legacy. And yet laughter is no more transparent for people than sneezing, yawning, and hiccupping. Possible reasons for this paradox were discussed above. It is easy to understand why the metamessage of nonseriousness accompanies negativistic play, which relates man to his ancestors and periodically disrupts the evolutionarily younger serious play peculiar only to man. It is less evident why we see laughter through a glass darkly, whereas the meaning of its evolutionary precursor is clear to our primate relatives (this is a fact known to any primatologist), and, accordingly, was clear to our ancestors as well.

To be sure, the word “clear” when applied to animals does not have the same sense as it has with reference to man, and means only the ability to use and perceive a signal according to its function and in an appropriate context. It is this ability that man has almost lost with respect to laughter. Culture has repressed its original function, replacing it by a host of alien meanings, but still has not transformed laughter into something qualitatively different from what it was in our ancestors.⁶

In general, culture’s ability to deform at its discretion elements of our behavioral heritage is great but not infinite. Extreme cases only confirm this. Here is a blatant example of culture’s outrage upon nature. During Lent Russian peasant women refused breast milk to their children as they did not dare “break the fast for their infants’ souls” (Maksimov, 1994/1903, p. 310). The fact that children often died as a result did not stop their mothers; after all “if a child dies, then it must be God’s will, and so the child is pleasing to God” (ibid). Can one conclude from this that the church managed to do away with the maternal instinct? Certainly not. Mothers, as at all times, cared for the well-being of their children; they were simply taught that salvation of the soul mattered more than survival of the body.

The term “instinct” is not used by ethologists anymore, because it has been established that most behavioral patterns in higher animals are

both innate and learned. However, the innate component in laughter is so heavily predominant (because its physiological mechanism is localized in evolutionally ancient parts of the brain) that it will not be a big mistake to call laughter an instinct and to say that our ancestors, like modern apes, understood laughter, or rather, protolaughter, instinctively and unmistakably. The instinct of laughter⁷ has survived; in fact laughter has grown immensely stronger as compared to the protolaughter of primates; however, its understanding has disappeared. While the biocultural continuity in basic emotions is obvious, and culture only modifies their meaning without changing it radically (joy, anger, fear, sadness, surprise remain themselves on either side of the boundary between nature and culture), the situation with laughter is more complex. It does remain itself, as I tried to demonstrate; however, owing to its opacity, it has acquired a multitude of alien meanings and can occur in contexts which in no way resemble the original one. People have grown accustomed to thinking that it can mean anything; but if that were so, it would mean nothing.

Without understanding the meaning of laughter, man – the speaking primate – does his best to turn laughter into a conventional sign like other linguistic signs. These attempts are futile because the innate system of facial display and vocal communication, of which laughter is part, functions in an autonomous mode and cannot be subordinated to convention.⁸ The neurophysiological data on laughter cited in section 2.1 show that we are dealing with an ancient subcortical mechanism, whereas the role of the cortex with regard to spontaneous laughter is inhibitory. Meanwhile, the main requirement to a language sign is its complete subordination to voluntary, that is, cortical, control. Therefore laughter is incompatible with speech and is in principle ineligible for the role of a linguistic sign.⁹ However much language, ritual language in particular, may have aspired to subordinate prelinguistic expressive means and to turn them into linguistic signs, these patterns resist such attempts and eventually revert to their intrinsically autonomous nature, functioning “at idle.” Thus, having feigned laughter for some time to evoke the childbirth goddess, Yakuts lost control of themselves and were overcome with hysteria (Khristoforova, 2002).

According to the hypothesis advocated in this book, laughter is obscure to man because it is opposed to the principal means whereby man conceives the world – reason and language. The incongruity inherent in man’s biocultural status manifests itself here with utmost clarity. Rather than returning man from culture to nature, laughter reminds him of the

artificiality of his cultural status. This is almost impossible to understand “from inside” culture and to express by means of language (hence the chronic failures of uncountable theories of laughter)¹⁰ – but it can be sensed perfectly in festive rituals of renewing the world by means of chaos and in the perception of humor. Analyzing the individual unconscious is useless here because the meaning of laughter lies deep in the evolutionary memory of our species.

With whatever careful observation we described different types of laughter and however much we argued about their meaning, we will not understand this phenomenon unless we know the biological (in particular, the ethological) facts. Such knowledge cannot be expected of lay people or even of great writers; that is why the analysis of texts brings us only up to the borders of language, but no further. The same applies to ethnographic observations. Trust in the cultural meanings of laughter, all their importance notwithstanding, will lead us either to cultural relativism, that is, to the idea that laughter, whatever it was by origin, has lost its innate function and has become as conventional as any linguistic sign¹¹ or to the belief that one of the cultural meanings of laughter is its original meaning.

Marina Butovskaya and I were somewhat puzzled when one of our opponents, a talented anthropologist and folklore scholar, claimed that laughter was nothing but a sign of man’s connection with the divine (Chesnov, 1996; Kozintsev and Butovskaya, 1996, 1997). Bizarre as it is, the idea of the “divine nature” of laughter has been advocated more than once on the basis of ample folkloric evidence and is neither better nor worse than the idea of laughter’s “sexual nature.” In this respect the situation with laughter is the same as with sneezing, the only difference being that none of the folklore scholars, to my knowledge, has asserted that the analysis of superstitions and omens surrounding this physiological act is relevant to understanding its nature. True, laughter is “nobler” than sneezing and its cultural role is incomparably greater, but this is no excuse for arguing from cultural phenomenology alone. The precultural (i.e., biological) component is no less in laughter than in sneezing, the host of invented cultural meanings notwithstanding. There is also no reason to think that this component is less in laughter than in any basic emotion like anger, fear, or joy. If we accept the fact that culture has not destroyed the nature of the emotions but has only modified it, then why do we shun the idea that the basic function of laughter has remained the same as it was by origin? Is it only because this function is obscure to us? Instead of denying the precultural roots

of laughter and opposing it to all other innate patterns, is it is not wiser to explore the reasons of its obscurity?

Leonid Karashev, a philologist and mythology scholar, writes about two circles of “alloforms” (cultural metaphors) of laughter – one military and erotic, another related to birth and light (Karashev, 1996, pp. 89-122). The extraordinary width of these circles and the ability of laughter to be associated in myths with the most diverse objects and phenomena is highly relevant for the laws governing the archaic (and not only archaic) mind. As to laughter as such, however, only one thing can be inferred from this host of fantastic interpretations: the basic function of laughter is obscure to people. It was displaced into the collective unconscious of our species and superseded by invented cultural meanings very long ago – possibly, immediately or shortly after language had emerged. Therefore, there is no hope for us to go “against the current” from the cultural phenomenology of laughter to its forgotten sources and its nature (“ontology”). By contrast, moving “with the current” – from the sources to the present – appears quite natural. This is precisely what I have tried to do in chapter 2.

4.2 Laughter and Evil: The History of a Misunderstanding

Among the numerous fake meanings of laughter there is one that requires particular examination. While the other meanings, whether invented by lay people or by theorists, stem from a comparatively harmless fantasizing, the issue here is one of fundamental confusion that has serious ideological implications.

The view in question is that laughter is intrinsically connected with evil and violence. The idea is often ascribed to Hobbes, whose superiority theory is akin to his idea of *bellum omnium contra omnes* (see chapter 1). Actually the roots run much deeper; for according to Plato’s *Laws* (I, 626), too, everyone is at war with everyone else. Not only does Plato’s Socrates in the *Philebus* (48-50) link laughter to something like schadenfreude, but the laughter of God in the Old Testament, too, is filled with anger and vengeance: “Why do the heathen rage, and the people imagine a vain thing? ... He that sitteth in the heavens shall laugh: the Lord shall have them in derision. Then shall he speak unto them in his wrath, and vex them in his sore displeasure.” (Ps. 1:1, 4-5); “The wicked plotteth against the just, and gnasheth upon him with his teeth. The Lord shall laugh at him: for he seeth that his day is coming.” (Ps. 37:12-13).¹²

The issue concerns not only words and emotions. Ancient festive ceremonies of mock crowning and uncrowning, which stemmed from

agrarian New Year rituals, could culminate in the murder of the mock god or king (Frazer, 1998/1922, pp. 701-3; Freidenberg, 1997, p. 98, 153; Bakhtin, 1984/1965, pp. 197-8; Baroja, 1979, pp. 153-4, 309-15, et al.; see Perry, 1966, on the cultural and psychological meaning of ritual regicide). Shockingly similar manifestations are observed in “new Saturnalia” characteristic of modern subcultures such as that of the Russian army (see, for example, Bannikov, 2002). To suppose continuity of tradition in such cases is hardly possible. So was laughter connected with violence from time immemorial? The idea that modern laughter at the sufferings of others, even insignificant ones (like falling) originates in human sacrifices, the dismemberment of bodies, and other ancient manifestations of violence and cruelty has been expressed more than once (Leacock, 1935, pp. 9-13; Agranovich and Berezin, 2005, pp. 285-6; Lashchenko, 2006, p. 200).

It is widely held that the first laughter was cruel and inhuman. The following dicta will suffice to illustrate this. “As laughter emerges with man from the mists of antiquity it seems to hold a dagger in its hand” (Gregory, 1924, p. 13). “Laughter is a spiritualized snarl” (Ludovici, 1932, p. 30). “The savage who cracked his enemy over the head with a tomahawk and shouted ‘Ha, ha’ was the first humorist” (Leacock, 1935, p. 9). “The single source from which all modern forms of wit and humor have developed is the roar of triumph in an ancient jungle duel” (Rapp, 1951, p. 21). “An efferent reaction of the autonomous nervous system, that bizarre series of motor spasms is often... accompanied by a twisting and contorting of the mouth and a baring of the teeth in a grim rictus, which in any other species would seem to signify aggression” (Brottman, 2004, p. XVII). “For an infant to smile took hundreds of thousands of years of barbarous, deafening laughter directly related to the grimaces of animal rage and bellicose enthusiasm” (Karassev, 1996, p. 20). As civilization evolved, laughter, according to the traditional view, became more and more “ennobled.”

Indeed, the male characters of heroic epic usually laugh after downing, wounding, or killing an enemy. Unrelated epic poems from the *Iliad* or *Jangar*¹³ contain episodes like the following:

...Then Alexandros, laughing merrily,
sprang from his hiding-place and cried out his speech of triumph:
‘You are hit, and my arrow flew not in vain. How I wish
I had struck you in the depth of the belly and torn the life from you.’¹⁴

(*Iliad*, 11: 378-81)

But in the modern age as well war and slaughter can be accompanied by the laughter of victors, as attested in various parts of the world from Indonesia to the former Yugoslavia (Provine, 2000, p. 47). Gregory (who wrote about ancient laughter with a dagger in its hand), suggested a psychological explanation as well: “Laughter is a response to a call for action that is quickly called off... When the final stroke is given the successful striker must still act; there is nothing for him to do – so he laughs.” (Gregory, 1924, pp. 28, 84). Indeed, being incompatible with aggressive tension, laughter arises only after tension has given way to relaxation. Psychologically, this involuntary play signal may evidence a sudden reduction of anger (Tomkins, 1984; Keltner and Bonanno, 1997). “Barking dogs occasionally bite,” wrote Konrad Lorenz (1966, p. 294), “but laughing men hardly ever shoot!”

Few people believe that laughter and humor are inherently and exclusively aggressive. One cannot help noticing something contrary here, something entirely unshadowed, and then one can only be amazed at how these opposites can coexist. Having repeated the Platonic-Hobbesian idea that laughter expresses “malicious joy,” Emile Dupréel asked a baffled question: “How could this molecule have formed from two atoms that are so different?” (Dupréel, 1928, p. 213). “Perhaps the original source parted into two streams,” Stephen Leacock supposed, “In one direction flowed, clear and undefiled, the humor of human kindness. In the other, the polluted waters of mockery and sarcasm, the ‘humor’ that turned into the cruel sports of rough ages, the infliction of pain as a perverted source of pleasure” (Leacock, 1937, p. 100). Theoretically, the reasoning is faultless. In practice, however, by no means all classics fall on the positive side. It is easy to see, for example, why Leacock disliked Aristophanes and Cervantes. It is less clear why he liked Shakespeare and Mark Twain, whose humor is anything but “clear and undefiled.”

In Russia, the central issue in the debates around the axiology of laughter has been the attitude toward the theories of Bakhtin, who evaluated folk carnivalesque laughter highly positively, in spite of its excesses.¹⁵ It is not quite clear whether Bakhtin viewed the Rabelaisian motifs of slaughter, evisceration, and mutilation, which feature prominently in his theory of the “grotesque body,” as a reference to medieval or ancient reality, to human sacrifices, in particular, which were followed by a merry feast, or as fantasy (Bakhtin, 1984/1965, pp. 196-212). The phrase that Rabelais made short work of Mardi Gras dummies without torturing living persons (*ibid*, p. 213) raises the hope that one is dealing with the second possibility, although a certain shadow of doubt remains

nevertheless. Indeed, carnival excesses are known to have sometimes culminated in an orgy of violence and even genuine butchery (Baroja, 1979, pp. 65, 93-4, 156; Gurevich, 1997, pp. 56-6).

Not only motifs of violence, but also the utmost obscenity of festive behavior compelled Bakhtin's opponents to make a directly opposite assessment of carnivalesque laughter. Thus, the Christian-minded philosopher and philologist Aleksei Losev (1978, pp. 591-2) called Rabelais' novel the "aesthetic apotheosis of all sorts of beastliness and filth," and his laughter "satanic" (see Emerson, 2000, pp. 100-1).

Bakhtin has long been criticized for having created an idealized picture of medieval popular culture. In the case of Aron Gurevich these criticisms grew more intense in his late works, where he called for abandoning the term "popular culture," although he himself devoted more than one book to this topic (cf. Gurevich, 1981, pp. 276-8; 1997). The events of Russia's twentieth-century history are obviously reflected in the debates, tingeing them with a bitterness that is by no means academic.¹⁶ Thus, German theologians who study carnival blame Bakhtin for his alleged adherence to Lenin's idea of two cultures in a class society (see Koliazin, 2002, p. 90, for references). Bakhtin's words that "popular festive forms look into the future" and that "[t]hey present the victory of this future, of the golden age, over the past" (Bakhtin, 1984/1965, p. 256) are read quite differently after this "future" became the past. Nowadays many view Bakhtin in his late (Rabelaisian) stage, at best, as a utopian (Morson and Emerson, 1990, pp. 67, 89-96, 433-70; Emerson, 2000, pp. 70, 184; Gardiner, 1993; Averintsev, 1993, 2001; Gurevich, 1997); at worst, as an apologist for tyranny (Groys, 1997). The latter accusation was met at once with a sharp rebuff (Lachmann, 1997).

Interestingly, it is not so much Bakhtin and even not so much carnival that is subject to condemnation today as laughter itself. Marina Riumina's book contains a highly skeptical evaluation of it along with a standard denunciation of Bakhtin's theory (Riumina, 2003, pp. 115-6, 210-37). While Bakhtin is more and more often censured for having taken a position next door to conformism, Riumina's writings (and not only hers) fit into the context of current official church-backed policy at least no worse than Bakhtin's views fitted into the Soviet context: "The traditional Christian attitude to laughter must be restored, must become intelligible to everybody, and become the position which cultural institutions, television, other mass media, public opinion, etc., take into consideration" (ibid., p. 237). Well, let's give Bakhtin his due: at least he never offered society or its officials practical recipes.

Anti-Bakhtinism and enmity against laughter rise to the utmost pitch in the recent book by Svetlana Lashchenko (2006). The author recommends putting an end to the “idealistic belief in the unpolluted goodness of laughter, which is supposedly always vivifying and optimistic,” and removing from laughter “the luster of customary and convenient delusions” (Lashchenko, 2006, pp. 220-1). What she finds beneath the luster is scary indeed. Lashchenko’s view of laughter is reminiscent of Georges Bataille’s or of the most dismal visions of the Anglo-American Hobbesians of the early 1900s (see above). What prompted her to write this book? Ukrainian funeral rites, which are undoubtedly ancient, but which had survived until the early twentieth century. During these ceremonies people laughed, behaved in an utterly shocking manner, did unimaginable things with the dead body, and drove themselves to frenzy; for, in Lashchenko’s words (*ibid.*, p. 47) they fell under the spell of the “aggressive energy of the Sacral.” And, on close scrutiny, Kupala’s¹⁷ rites and wedding ceremonies, hardly looked much more pleasant. Both have preserved a “connection with the frenzy of a crowd out of control” (*ibid.*, p. 143). But, worst of all, “ritual ‘laughter’ together with ritual sex and ritual movement was involved with blood; in fact implicated in its appearance” (*ibid.*, p. 199). Admittedly, ethnographic material gives no evidence for this, but so much the worse: “Descendents of archaic people have done everything to forget the bloody mixture of fury and barbarity of their ancestors, which at one time was the nutrient medium for the voraciously growing ‘embryo of laughter’” (*ibid.*, p. 82).

Granted, “archaic people made a clear distinction between ritual ‘laughter’ and spontaneous, mirthful laughter, familiar to them as to all generations of humans” (*ibid.*, p. 200). But no sooner do we say “Thank God” than the last glimpse of light disappears: “...And to this day, by laughing at someone’s being beaten, falling down, deformities, and stupidity, we revive laughter’s most ancient ordinances. Banishment by derision is akin to ritual murder. Even today derision arouses aggressive instincts, or, at least appeals to them. In this sense our modern laughter is related to evil as before...” and the reason is neither degradation nor deformation, but the “return of the ancient meanings of laughter... the discovery of certain intrinsic characteristics of this phenomenon that mankind has not succeeded in coping with over the long centuries of evolution” (*ibid.*, pp. 200-1). By way of proof, we are referred to Karashev, who views the facial expression of laughter as a “grin strikingly reminiscent of completely different emotions: the grimace of weeping or unchecked fury” (Karashev, 1996, p. 24).

And, sure enough, we hear yet again of the need for practical measures: "...A campaign waged by the Church against laughter acquires its justification and its historical and cultural relevance.... Recognition of the real danger a regular mass transition to borderline states of consciousness holds for the human mind and of laughter's role therein necessarily prompted the development of certain measures to secure people's mental health" (Lashchenko, 2006, p. 203). As if only paganism were responsible for the mass transition of our minds to borderline states, and the only thing Christianity had in mind were our mental health (and our physical well-being, too; see above on breast milk as a "peccant ferial food")! As if seriousness were the sister of innocence! However, it should be admitted that "implementing these measures in practice often meant doing even greater harm to the health and at times to the lives of people" (*ibid.*).

Now is the time to catch our breath and to look at things more soberly and more broadly. Jest, laughter, and obscene pranks at funerals and funeral repasts are a universal custom practiced by unrelated people all over the world —from Africans to ancient Romans and from Australian aborigines to the French (Hocart, 1927; Freidenberg, 1997/1936, p. 98; Abrahamian, 1983, pp. 74-5; Artemova, 2006). "So frequently is joking and buffoonery associated in various parts of the world with death that when we come across ceremonial joking it is advisable to consider whether we are not in the presence of death real or mystical, or whether the spirits of the dead are not concerned." (Hocart, 1927, p. 74).

Thus it is precisely the funerary ceremonies with which the behavior in question has been normally associated. Clearly, the cultural motivations were irrational. Freidenberg (1994, pp. 104-5) called laughter a metaphor of death at the stage of rebirth. Moreover, reverse behavior – blasphemy and mockery, in particular – was associated in the most diverse cultures with the other world, where, according to archaic notions, "everything was the other way around." Therefore, for a dead person obscenities had a diametrically opposite (pious) meaning (Uspenskii, 1993, pp. 123-4). However, there is not the least reason to separate laughter at the funerary ceremonies from normal modern laughter and humor and to consider it cruel, perverse, or harmful to mental health.

Eisenstein (2002/1940-48, pp. 429) wrote that it was chiefly the capacity of Mexicans – "bearers of living life" – to ridicule death that brought him to Mexico. In his words, this nation knew how "to laugh in a childishly naïve manner in the face of what strikes fear into ageing,

decaying nations that are unconvinced of the vitality of their principles and of the life-asserting inexhaustibility of their popular sources.”

Iulia Artemova, a specialist in ethnic psychology, labels most forms of ritual laughter, including laughter at funerary ceremonies, “ritual humor,” as do many anthropologists in the West (see, e.g., Apte, 1985). I do not consider this term particularly incorrect. Even if people imitated laughter at first as in the ritual of invoking the childbirth goddess (Khristoforova, 2002), spontaneous laughter eventually took possession of them just the same. However inappropriate such mirth in the presence of death appears to us, it evidences one thing only: that the capacity of temporarily disabling a serious attitude (especially to psychologically traumatizing themes) with the aid of a humorous metarelation was at least no less developed among ancient people than among us. The motivations might be irrational, but the conduct itself was thoroughly rational. In short, “ritual humor” is genuine humor.¹⁸ Evidently, representatives of archaic traditions understood its healing properties better, not worse than we. The widely held opinion that ritual laughter has nothing to do with the comic is a view through the lens of post-traditional culture. It is time to recognize that the comic is not at all obliged to fall within the narrow limits which we, people of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, have outlined for it.

In Artemova’s opinion, the pagan belief that laughter and obscenity do not insult a dead person but rather attest love and respect for him/her (this idea was held, for example, by Australian aborigines – real not imaginary members of the archaic tradition) is psychologically more salutary than the obligatory expression of grief. The spontaneity of the latter should not be exaggerated, by the way, and neither should the ritual nature of funerary humor. Christian ideas are not in the least “more natural” than those of pagans.

But even if ritual laughter became overly spontaneous and led to excesses (for example, to fights), this is no reason for a crusade against laughter as such.¹⁹ Take an example closer to us and unrelated to laughter rites. In the summer of 2006, Italy faced France at the football World Cup final. As I am writing these lines, the radio is reporting the rowdy behavior of the Italian fans because of – what? The Italian team’s defeat? On the contrary – it was they who had won. So then, is this how you express joy? Let us apply Lashchenko’s idea to this situation, replacing the word “laughter” with the word “joy”: “Descendants of archaic people have done everything to forget the bloody mixture of fury and barbarity of their ancestors, which at one time was the nutrient medium for the

voraciously growing ‘embryo of joy.’” As a result one of the fundamental emotions passed on from biology to culture – joy – turns out to be discredited. Or, perhaps, as in the case of two types of laughter we should distinguish two types of joy – the ritual and the spontaneous?

But, after all, fans indulge in even worse outrages when their team loses.²⁰ A defeat suffered by a favorite team disappoints civilized people, but even among them anger can be mixed in with sadness. This is well known to psychologists. Leonard Berkowitz (1990) has noted that although most bereaved people have no reason to connect the loss with someone’s misdeeds or to accuse someone, they often experience anger. And not only do they experience it – they actually become aggressive (*ibid*). Sadness is yet another basic emotion man has received as a biological legacy. Let us conduct the same mental experiment: “Descendents of archaic people have done everything to forget the bloody mixture of fury and barbarity of their ancestors, which at one time was the nutritive medium for the voraciously growing ‘embryo of sadness.’” Yet again, absurdity. Or perhaps, there are two types of sadness – the spontaneous and the ritual?

But if neither joy nor sadness can be discredited that way, then why should one apply the same reasoning to laughter? Is it because the meaning of joy and sadness as well as that of anger is transparent, and there is no risk of confusing one emotion with the other even when they are commingled, whereas the meaning of laughter is obscure? But is this a reason for fantasizing about “archaic meanings,” “intrinsic characteristics,” “grimaces of fury” and two types of laughter rather than for looking at ethological facts, for restoring laughter’s well-deserved independent status, and for placing it alongside of joy, sadness, anger, and other basic human manifestations? Granted, laughter is not an emotion but an expression signaling that the violation of the norm is not serious – so what? The innate component in laughter predominates just as it does in any emotion and in any inborn behavioral pattern. As joy, sadness, anger, and maternal instinct remain themselves in spite of all attempts by culture and language to transform them beyond recognition, so laughter remains itself despite all its cultural aberrations.

Moreover, because of the richness of man’s mentality, the cultural – the cognitive, in particular – component of the emotions is greater (and, accordingly, the innate, less) than in expressions, which are generally more standard than emotions. Therefore the mixture of emotions, which, in man, are always commingled with cognitive processes, is more normal than the mixture of expressions. After all, our linguistic intuition accepts

the phrase “malicious joy”; even though both feelings can be experienced simultaneously, joy remains itself, and so does malice.

Laughter, meanwhile, is in the first place an expression rather than a feeling. It differs from any emotion by being completely unconscious. It cannot be imitated voluntarily because its mechanism is subcortical; one can only disinhibit laughter and “drop the reins.” Once we have done this, our voluntary control is lost altogether, and all our thoughts and judgments disappear. Feelings also disappear, as a rule, except one – the blissful ancient joy of disorderly play. Since laughter is not only unconscious, but also involuntary, it is even more autonomous than many unconscious expressions which are produced by a voluntary contraction of muscles. Therefore, expressions such as “aggressive laughter” or “furious laughter” are even more oxymoronic than expressions such as “friendly clenching of fists” or “tender grinding of teeth.”

Spontaneous laughter accompanying cruelty is not some special “cruel laughter,” but the most ordinary laughter, the same as always. People brought up in a brutal culture find the sufferings of creatures they torture and kill, funny. Criminals differ from other people not by *how* they rejoice, grieve, and laugh, but by *what* gladdens, grieves, and amuses them. Separation of laughter from its original context of friendly play is an entirely cultural phenomenon. But changing the nature of laughter itself is beyond the power of culture as it is beyond its power to change the nature of joy, grief, or maternal instinct.

For the sake of fairness, lest I be reproached for having preconceptions, I should mention that one single ethologist – Irenäus Eibl-Eibesfeldt – expressed a dissenting opinion, namely, that laughter had originated from aggressive calls, similar to a malicious bark, which nonhuman primates address to their rivals (Eibl-Eibesfeldt, 1989, pp. 138, 315). However, Eibl-Eibesfeldt is not a primatologist. None of the primatologists, to my knowledge, share this view. Everyone who has studied the behavior of nonhuman primates knows that they, like other animals, seldom confuse playful assault with true assault. Thanks to the studies by Jan van Hooff and other primatologists (see section 2.2), it can no longer be doubted that humor and laughter are rooted in the social play of our prehuman ancestors. This is what van Hooff and Preuschoft (2003, p. 287) write about various forms of the so-called “aggressive laughter”: “These forms are better regarded as the result of mixed motivations; they are secondary intermediate forms where elements of other behavioral attitudes...have been mixed in.”

Most specialists, including the leading experts in this area, believe that the problem of the origin of laughter has been finally resolved (van Hooff and Preuschoft, 2003; Provine, 2000; Ruch and Ekman, 2001; Martin, 2007, pp. 188-9). Speculations on this point, still found in the works of philosophers and other specialists in the humanities, are solely due to biological ignorance. Instead of projecting late forms of human behavior, however archaic they may appear,²¹ onto the Paleolithic or even prehuman past, one should proceed by the natural path – from the sources (reconstructed with a fair degree of certainty on the basis of primatological facts) to the present. It would be strange to question the correctness of such a path 140 years after the publication of Darwin's books on man, unless, of course, one takes creationist positions.

At the same time, it would be a mistake to think that the ethnographic material cannot offer anything for detecting the roots of laughter. To be sure, it can, but it must satisfy two requirements: first, to be (and not just appear) archaic, and second, to reveal nontrivial parallels with the biological facts. I am aware of only one study the material of which satisfies both conditions. This is the book by Levon Abrahamian, who uses Australian data, specifically those collected by William Stanner (1989) and others, to reconstruct the archaic festival – the most ancient of all known to us (Abrahamian, 1983). On the evolutionary scale, the gap between the Australian reconstruction and its East Slavic counterpart equals at least ten millennia (the former corresponds to the Mesolithic, if not the Upper Paleolithic). Which of the two reconstructions, other things being equal, is more relevant to the problem of laughter origins is obvious enough.

But there is no “other things being equal”! It turns out that the Australian reconstruction, unlike the East Slavic, satisfies the second condition as well: in its basic characteristics it fully agrees with what biological data tell us about the original context of laughter; and after all, Abrahamian, an ethnographer and folklorist, did not consider primatological facts, and it is impossible to accuse him of holding preconceptions. The coincidence, meanwhile, is striking: what we see in both cases is complete peacefulness, the absence of any tension, the utter impossibility of confusing playful aggression with real aggression, temporary abolition or inversion of social hierarchy, mirthful chaos – and laughter (Stanner, 1989; Abrahamian, 1983, pp. 31-8, 105, 107, 125; see section 2.4).

Can such coincidence be accidental? Hardly so! Of course, both the Mesolithic and even the Upper Paleolithic – epochs with which the early layer of the Australian festival correlates – are far removed from the

beginning of human evolutionary history. But if we suppose that these data agree with the primatological evidence by chance alone, this would mean that at earlier stages of the Paleolithic the context of laughter was qualitatively different (in particular, associated with violence) and later inexplicably came full circle. Isn't it more logical to assume a direct continuity caused by the tremendous conservatism of prehistoric society?

The issue of European carnival is more complicated. If one is to believe Bakhtin, who was hardly familiar with the Australian data, let alone the ethological facts, then continuity is present in this case as well. The abolition or inversion of hierarchy, all sorts of "coarse bodily contact," of jocular beatings in particular, "ambivalent praise-abuse" – all that Bakhtin called "carnivalization" – is paralleled by the Australian festival, and if one excludes verbal patterns, then by the playful behavior of nonhuman primates as well. To me as an anthropologist, these parallels seemed – and, frankly, still seem – indisputable (Kozintsev, 2002d, p. 214). However, Bakhtin's "anthropological approach" to carnival has recently provoked such a furious rebuke by a whole group of cultural historians, Russian and Western alike (thus, members of the German school consider carnival a purely Christian phenomenon and derive it solely from the liturgy; see: Koliazin, 2002, pp. 89-90), that for Bakhtin's sake, it would perhaps be reasonable to refrain from attempting to support his reconstruction with very ancient parallels before new facts come to light. After all, the German theologians, insofar as I know, have yet to write anything about the essence of laughter or about its origin. Unlike them, Sergei Averintsev was quite straightforward: "[W]hat we find at the very origin of any sort of 'carnivalization' is – blood" (Averintsev, 2001, p. 86). And this is a thoroughly anthropological view; only, unlike Bakhtin's, it is wrong.

No doubt, one cannot ignore the dark side of European carnival – the element of aggression. This was characteristic of France, where carnival occasionally turned into slaughter (Gurevich, 1997, pp. 55-6), of Spain, where it still flourished in the nineteenth century and led to outbursts of dark passions and unmotivated violence (Baroja, 1979, pp. 153-4, 309-15, etc.), and of Germany, where the extreme cruelty of the mystery plays, which gave rise to carnival, bore a distinct imprint of the surrounding reality (Koliazin, 2002, p. 54). "Aggressive euphoria" of the audience at the mystery plays (*ibid.*) reminds us of the frenzy of the participants in the Ukrainian funerals as described by Lashchenko, and of modern football fans as well. While in the first case we are dealing with a Christian ritual; in the second, with a pagan ritual; and in the third,

with a non-ritual (“spontaneous”) behavior, the difference is immaterial. These are but different manifestations of the same phenomenon typical of relatively late historical traditions: a blurring of the boundary between cosmos and chaos, structure and anti-structure (Turner, 1969), orderly and disorderly play (see chapter 3). In the Australian festival, by contrast, this boundary was very distinct (Abrahamian, 1983, p. 66).

So, let us sum up. There is no evidence at all that “what we find at the very origin of any sort of ‘carnivalization’ is blood.” To believe this is the same as to believe that the original function of sexual relations is rape. What we actually find “at the very origin” is primate social play, and among humans – the archaic festival, where, according to the reconstruction, laughter and peace ruled, and mock aggression was not confused with true aggression. In this respect archaic people resembled young children and man’s primate kin.

But the further one gets from the sources – the weaker the memory of them. During human evolution, due to the development of the brain and the subordination of subcortical functions to cortical ones, of inborn behavioral patterns to culturally acquired programs, and of pre-symbolic metacommunicative signals to speech, the watershed between playful aggression and real aggression becomes less and less distinct and occasionally disappears. Leacock and those who share his views today err when they say that there was initially no watershed. Two different essences (“light” and “dark”) – could not have been blended in a single stream of laughter only to divide later. Were this so, the origins and functions of laughter would be impossible to understand.

Actually, the reverse happened: after the original meaning of laughter had been forgotten, two streams – the light, that of “pure” laughter originating in playful aggression as a sign of peacefulness, and the dark, related to real aggression, – blended, forming a mixture (not a pure compound!) that can be described as unnatural in the proper sense of the word.²² In ontogeny the same process is observed. Whereas playful aggression never grows into real aggression in young children, this happens more and more often during socialization, as the child matures and biological impulses give way to cultural motives. During adolescence, motives such as dominance assertion, competition for resources, etc., lead to the transformation of rough-and-tumble play into unrestrained aggression (Fry, 2004). By age twelve to thirteen it is already difficult to distinguish playful aggression from a real fight (Boulton and Smith, 1992). In nonhuman mammals, too, the distinction between mock aggression and true aggression can decrease with age (Power, 2000, p. 137).

The reasons for this, however, are only partly the same as in man. In the case of animals, innate playful propensities may gradually give way to likewise innate serious motivations such as competition for resources. In man, by contrast, there are two different processes involved. One is the same as in animals, whereas another is peculiar to man: innate predispositions are repressed by symbolically transmitted programs of behavior. Nothing even remotely similar to the large-scale misuse of laughter in human society has been observed in the animal world.

“How can one explain the breach of the boundary of playful discourse and the intrusion of real violence into the text of play?” asks Tatiana Shchepanskaia (2005, p. 91). Her answer is this: whereas real violence can be motivated by punishment for violating a group norm, playful aggression itself is the norm of play. “The intrusion of the social norm breaches the boundaries of the playful, conventional world, and social reality – interpersonal tensions, conflicts, etc. – rushes into the breach, causing real violence” (*ibid.*). But in light of what we know about the origin of laughter, we observe not so much the conflict between reality and play as the rivalry of two different realities and two different types of play, the encroachment of culture on nature.

Qualitatively different types of laughter – “light” and “dark” (“good” and “bad,” “spontaneous” and “ritual”) do not exist. However different the contexts of laughter may be, all misinterpretations notwithstanding, laughter always remains the same. In Gogol’s words, it is light and brings reconciliation to the soul – because it is such by nature. Laughter is a sign of the deep and ancient human unity, and against this background, everything separating people becomes immaterial.

The tragedy is that most people do not understand this and use their evolutionary legacy not simply in a wrong way but utterly in spite of its nature. This is why “even he who no longer fears anything else in the world fears ridicule.” Misuse of laughter is a fundamental error on the part of culture. Laughter itself is not culpable; it bears no hereditary guilt. The evil, which is mixed in with it, is unrelated to its nature. Although it, too, is partly rooted in our biology, the blame for the attempt to unite the ununitable – laughter and aggression – must be laid at culture’s door.

Those who think that laughter is evil or dual by nature may accuse me of asserting an absurdity: primate social play and the Australian festival turn out to be more carnivalesque for me than carnival itself! I will concede; the question after all is not one of names. True, if one speaks of carnival in the narrow sense, i.e., the late European phenomenon, then the presence in it of two elements of different origin is incontestable. The

carnavalesque element proper, in my view, really derives from peaceful, archaic forms of disorderly play (see section 3.2), while the element of aggression is rooted both in the pre-cultural past, and in purely human orderly play, specifically, in social contradictions and in the opposition between Christianity and paganism.

Using the terms “carnival” and “carnivalization” in the broadest sense, I designated the transformation of playful aggression into real aggression in rites of passage and in non-ritual laughter behavior by the term “decarnivalization” and tried to demonstrate that this phenomenon is purely cultural and relatively late. It has no parallels in the animal world and is one of the saddest testaments to man’s “victory” over his own nature (Kozintsev, 2002d; see section 3.2). No matter whether decarnivalization is related to the sacral or to the profane, it has nothing in common with disorderly play, peacefulness, or social unity.

Apparently, the boundary between playful and real aggression in the inverted life of ritual becomes blurred (as in East Slavic rites of passage and in European carnival) or disappears altogether (as in army Saturnalia), when aggression – both intragroup and intergroup – becomes the norm of everyday life.

Australian aborigines, by contrast, with their peaceful and mirthful festival provide an opposite example. Although by primitive standards they are considered bellicose, the level of violence in their Mesolithic society cannot be compared with that observed at the late stages of cultural evolution. And if in this (of course, only in this!) respect Australian natives remind us more of our primate kin²³ than of Europeans of recent centuries, then should we be surprised that their laughter behavior is much closer to the sources than that of people belonging to more advanced cultures? In spite of all the late aberrations, however, laughter has still remained itself and the positive element in the European carnival is obviously the same as in the Australian festival (Abrahamian, 1983, pp. 38, 47), no matter how much this angers the opponents of the “anthropological approach” to carnival.

Let us try and estimate the age of decarnivalization in human society. We will proceed on the premise that this phenomenon, to all appearances, did not yet exist in Australian society – possibly the most archaic of all known to ethnographers. Even if the Australians did not remain at the Mesolithic stage (which is the most likely case), but at the preceding, Upper Paleolithic stage, still, considering the age of anatomically modern humans (at least 160 thousand years), it turns out that decarnivalization characterizes only the last, comparatively short segment of the exis-

tence of *Homo sapiens* – no more than 40,000 years, that is, at most a quarter of the history of the human species. If we make a more realistic assumption that Australian society had reached the Mesolithic stage, which began no earlier than 15,000 years ago, then decarnivalization accounts for a maximum of ten percent of the history of our species and over the preceding ninety percent, disorderly play was as peaceful as among Australian aborigines.

If, however, we suppose that the parallels between the disorderly play in humans and in other primates are genuine (and facts do point in this direction, see chapters 2 and 3), then one must take into account the age of the hominid evolutionary line as a whole – at least six million years. And this means that no matter how far into the past we may reasonably shift the beginning of decarnivalization, it accounts for less than one percent of the time when man's ancestors, having already set out on their own path, that is, having diverged from the ancestors of other primate species, practiced, like the latter, the playful inversion of social relationships. The conclusion is obvious: speculations about the "bloody sources" of laughter are groundless.

Iulia Artemova (2006) conducted an interesting socio-psychological analysis of decarnivalization in modern urban culture. She demonstrated, in particular, that aggressive mockery is inherently opposed to the "joking relationships" that are common in traditional cultures (Apte, 1985). The latter belong to "essential laughter behavior" and are aimed at strengthening social ties; the former is manipulative and aggressive and falls under "instrumental laughter behavior." "In decarnivalization," Artemova writes, "laughter functions as an instrument. The capacity to laugh can also be used as a means for satisfying needs alien to laughter."

As the facts set out above show, laughter turned into an instrument of manipulation only at late stages of its evolution. Happily, the spontaneity of laughter to some degree prevents it from being used as such an instrument.

A typical example of decarnivalization is satire. Bakhtin (1984/1965, p. 51; 1976/posthumous) disliked it and considered its intensification in the post-carnival age a symptom of the decline of ambivalent popular laughter.²⁴ As we have seen, the two components of satire – the conscious (cultural) and the unconscious (innate) are antagonistic. The aim is incompatible with the means, content with form, the serious relation with the nonserious metarelation, man's belief in the correctness of his behavior with the metacommunicative signal of its incorrectness, and overt hostility with covert peacefulness. Satire is a typical manifestation

of “instrumental laughter behavior.” Laughter, which it tries to exploit for its own purposes, as a weapon, is deeply alien to satire by nature. It is the same sort of weapon as “Harlequin’s sword” – the slapstick that Harlequin used to strike his opponent with a loud whack without harming him. As Bakhtin (1976/posthumous) observed, “a laughing satirist is never cheerful. He tends to be gloomy and downcast” – in part because of his serious moralistic stance, in part because of his latent realization that his project is infeasible. And vice versa, when laughter wins, satire turns into humor, the inherent feature of which, according to F. Schlegel, is “pleasure in the bad,” or rather in disabling a serious attitude to the bad, in making everything equal to everything else, all people to each other.

Just what exactly can satire achieve with the aid of laughter, this great equalizer? The most is to fling man down from his pedestal, to deprive him of all rights to his uniqueness, but, contrary to the satirist’s intent, not in order to “ostracize” him, but only to make him equal to other people (thus, in spite of his conception, Chaplin humanized Hitler, making him funny). Essentially, the role of laughter as “social retribution,” or “ostracism” boils down just to this; and this is what “he who no longer fears anything else in the world” is afraid of.

If even such a task turns out to be beyond the ability of satire, it must content itself with the role of the Roman slave who whispered in the ear of the triumphant victor the magic warning-blessing: “Remember, you are mortal.” Politicians in a democratic society, like leaders in ancient society, are not afraid of being mocked; on the contrary, many of them seek this.²⁵ Because such a situation, of course, does not satisfy genuine satire, it has to quit laughing and amusing and become “gloomy and downcast.”

The time has come to recollect the Aristotelian formula: “[The laughable] consists in some blunder or ugliness that does not cause pain or disaster.” If we, like everyone else, associate this definition with the object, then it is too narrow; for laughter knows no bounds. As to satire, the objectivist definition suits it to a tee; for only its small part belongs to the comic, unless satire itself falls prey to laughter. The realm in which satire and laughter peacefully coexist is quite small and, in full agreement with Aristotle, extends only to comparatively harmless defects, which easily submit to correction with the aid of the gentlest forms of satire, which are close to humor.

Paradoxically, this view agrees with the protective aims of the ideologues of autocracy – however, not because they understand the essence

of laughter but because they don't understand it. One has to admit that when dealing with near-sighted dictators, who try to protect themselves from derision, the most reasonable course is to agree. Yes, one should not mock them – however, not because mockery can harm them, but because it can benefit them.

Indeed, the Aristotelian theory, which is so easy to disprove when it concerns the object, turns out to be amazingly true when applied to the subject. Not the external pretext of humor, which defies all definition and to which the labels such as “laughable,” “funny,” and “comic” have been attached ever since Aristotle, but humor itself – the state of mind and the behavior of those who laugh and amuse others – is “some blunder or ugliness that does not cause pain or disaster.” This is precisely what laughter tries to tell us. Thus we have come full circle. It's time to make a reckoning.

Notes

1. Chekhov (1980/1900, p. 7) took the same position when he admonished the actors in the spirit of Hamlet's instruction to the players: “I wrote to Meyerhold and in my letters sought to convince him not to be emphatic in depicting nervous people. After all, the overwhelming majority of people are nervous, the majority suffers, the minority feels acute pain. But where – in streets and in houses – do you see them rushing about, skipping, grabbing themselves by the head? One must express suffering as it is expressed in life, that is, not with the hands or feet, but with the tone, the glance; not gesticulation, but gracefulness.” At the turn of the century such a view appeared natural, whereas new tendencies in theatre and other art forms seemed to many people symptoms of psychopathology and “degeneration” (for a discussion with reference to laughter see: Lashchenko, 2006, pp. 208-20). Only later did it become obvious that the avant-garde was deeply rooted in archaic and folk culture.
2. Apparently, the vascular mechanism involved in crying, or rather in excreting tears, is close to that which causes blushing. In certain people, the excretion of tears is replaced by the reddening of the nose precisely in situations where crying can be expected. Crying, like blushing and turning pale, shows that not all emotional reactions which are part of human paralanguage are rooted in the prehuman past. Despite being evolutionally younger, these reactions are even more mysterious than laughter, the biological origin of which is clear enough. Apparently, they are rooted in the early stages of human evolution and are related to the evolution of the human brain, but the issue remains a mystery (Lutz, 1999; Walter, 2006).
3. “Beware of fainting-fits,” Sophia warns Laura in Jane Austen's *Love and Friendship*, “Though at the time they may be refreshing and agreeable yet believe me that they will in the end, if too often repeated and at improper seasons, prove destructive to your Constitution... Run mad as often as you chuse; but do not faint.”
4. “Do I really know why I'm crying?” asked Osip Mandelstam, and he also asked a more general question: “I'm given my body – what am I to do with it?” Not only the body, but also its functions are “given” to us by nature and are often opaque for us.
5. I thank Viktor Zazykin for making his then unpublished manuscript available and for useful discussions.

6. To reiterate, repression is understood here not in a Freudian sense (with reference to the individual), but in an evolutionary sense, with reference to the species. Also, the expression “the collective unconscious” refers to man’s innate behavioral predispositions inhibited by culture rather than to Jung’s mystical “archetypes.”
7. The expression “the instinct of laughter” was introduced by William McDougall (1922; 1931, pp. 387-97). I use it only in this place in the book and in a nonterminological sense; I do not at all suggest restoring its use. One should admit, however, that this expression is much more adequate than the expression “the language instinct” introduced by Steven Pinker (1995; see: Kozintsev, 2004), since the proportion of the innate and the learned in laughter and in language is not simply different but diametrically opposed.
8. Communication in birds and cetaceans, like language in man, is based on the voluntary control of vocalization (Deacon, 1997, pp. 225, 241, 243), but in nonhuman primates such control is absent, and the facial muscles, too, work involuntarily (ibid. p. 244-6).
9. The phonological rendition of laughter has turned into a linguistic index sign – an interjection. Like laughter, such interjections (“ha-ha,” etc.) are used in nonserious contexts, but, unlike laughter, are subject to the speaker’s conscious and voluntary control, and are therefore related to irony rather than humor. But since irony is inherently opposed to humor (see section 3.4), there is no semantic continuity between a linguistic sign and a nonlinguistic one, as in the case of certain other interjections derived from calls (“phooey,” “phew,” “oh,” etc.). On the contrary, emphasis is on the distinction between an unarticulated call and a word, on the inadequacy of phonological rendition. The speaker is skeptical about the spontaneity of laughter: “Ha-ha-ha; very funny”; “‘Ha-ha,’ said Eeyore bitterly”; “‘Ho-ho,’ objected Ellochka, sitting down on a new chair” [from *The Twelve Chairs* by Ilia Ilf and Yevgenii Petrov]. Thus, the antagonism between laughter and language is evident at this level as well.
10. I am not in the least confident that the theory advanced in this book will escape the same fate. What I am absolutely certain of is that the analysis of jokes, wisecracks, cartoons, “oppositeness of scripts,” “frame shifts,” and “logical mechanisms” does very little to bring us closer to understanding the essence of laughter and humor.
11. Ray Birdwhistell (1970) advocated this position with respect not only to all facial expressions, but to everything that he called kinesics – to whatever the body can express.
12. Citations from the Authorized Version [*Trans. note*].
13. The Oirat epic cycle that matured in the fifteenth through eighteenth centuries. The story as a whole concerns the khan Jangar and his twelve warriors’ heroic deeds: how they build up the khan’s palace, how they defeat threatening invaders, how they conquer others’ territories, and how they woo and marry beautiful maidens according to the dictates of destiny. For details see “The Oirat Epic Cycle of Jangar.” Chao Gejin. *Oral Tradition* 16/2 (2001):402-35. <http://journal.oraltradition.org/files/articles/16ii/Chao.pdf> [*Trans. note*].
14. *The Iliad of Homer*. Translated with an Introduction by Richmond Lattimore. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1951, p. 244. Lattimore remarks that in the *Iliad* Alexandros is the more usual name for Paris. [*Trans. note*].
15. This is the major difference between the theory of Mikhail Bakhtin and that of Olga Freidenberg, which is totally devoid of an axiological element. Evidently, she went to the opposite extreme, emphasizing, in the spirit of Lévy-Bruhl, the total lack of isomorphism between the archaic mind and that of modern people, in fact, their incommensurability. It is difficult for a modern anthropologist to accept such a view.

16. Political events outside Russia occasionally give rise to no less heated debates around the connection between humor and enmity. The most illustrative recent example is the Muhammad cartoons affair (Davies et al., 2008).
17. In East Slavic mythology and ritual practice Kupála is the name of the chief character in the holiday observed at the summer solstice and the name of the holiday as well, the holiday being celebrated on the night of 23-24 June Old Style, that is, the saint's day of John the Baptist. In folklore he is often called Ivan Kupála, and the holiday was marked by archaic rites and sexual license. [*Trans. note*].
18. Let me recall that authors who use the term "humor" in a narrow sense (Freud among them) refer to a sublime form of the comic, in particular, the capacity to laugh at one's own sufferings and death.
19. Incidentally, speaking of the scale of mass madness and violence, why not compare carnivalesque or any other excesses of laughter with crusades and witch hunts – the quintessence of Christian seriousness? Whatever one might say, the excesses of disorderly play remain excesses. They are in no way comparable with the consequences of orderly human games.
20. After the end of the First World War the following joke was told: "If the Paris Peace Conference turns out bad for Poland, people will take to the streets and begin smashing Jews." "Well, then God grant that it turns out well for Poland!" "Heaven forbid!" "Why?" "Because then people will take to the streets and begin smashing Jews."
21. The probable reason for Eibl-Eibesfeldt's mistake is that having made a major contribution to the ethological study of modern humans, he speculatively projected human behavior onto that of nonhuman primates, with which he was poorly acquainted.
22. Dupréel's "chemical" metaphor (see above) is just as misleading as Leacock's "stream" metaphor. Laughter is not a "compound of joy and malice," but a special element, a molecule consisting of a single atom.
23. Our closest relatives, the chimpanzees, too, are considered aggressive by simian standards, but even their "lethal raids" into the territory of neighboring groups are hardly comparable with wars that characterize the late stages of human history.
24. His article on satire for the *Literary Encyclopedia* (Bakhtin, 1996/1940 posthumous) is based on completely different premises and bears the obvious stamp of the official concept of "laughter as a weapon of satire."
25. The pharmaceutical magnate Bryntsalov (a candidate for president of the Russian Federation in the 1996 election) offered Viktor Shenderovich a million dollars to make him one of the characters on the satirical television program *Puppets (Kukly)* (Shenderovich, 2004, p. 581; see also Razuvaev, 2002, p. 172; Kozintsev, 2008) *Puppets* was a program that ran on NTV from December 1994 through January 2004. It drew some inspiration from the British program *Spitting Image*, which ran 1984-96 and featured puppets caricaturing British and American political figures [*Trans. note*].

Conclusions

We have approached laughter and humor in various ways. In chapter 1, philosophical, psychological, and semiotic issues are discussed. Humor is opposed to all other human senses, being entirely subjective rather than relational. Unlike other senses, humor has no objects in either reality or imagination and therefore has no semantics. What is described as the “semantics of humor” and includes the so-called “knowledge resources” is mainly pretext. The linguistic theories of humor, whether the GTVH or newer ones based on cognitive approaches, proceed from the assumption that the meaning of humor must be sought in the semantics of the humorous text. However, neither oppositeness of scripts nor frame shifting is specific to humor; in fact, they are unrelated to its essence. The essence of humor is rooted in a single opposition: *serious/nonserious*, all other oppositions being neutralized.

Unlike beauty (which, like other qualities, is only partly located in the eye of the beholder, and partly in the object), “funniness” is a psychological and semantic nonentity because the object to which it seemingly refers provides only a trivial and short-lived pretext for disabling the subject’s serious attitude. Words such as “funny,” “laughable,” “ludicrous,” etc. are pseudo-predicates, referring not to what in serious discourse would be considered the signified, but solely to the fact that the signified has turned into nothing (Kant).

The key element of humor is the subject’s neutralizing metarelation to his own seriousness. In other words, humor, unlike all other senses, is purely reflective and self-intentional. Its true objects are the subject’s own thoughts, feelings, and words. Humor deprives them of their meaning and plays with empty mental representations.

The pure comic image is primitive and devoid of content. Rather than being an alternative image of the object caused by the shift of the subject’s attitude, the pure comic image results from the subject’s temporary and feigned psychic regression, viewed from his actual mental level. Not the object’s alleged characteristics, but solely the subject’s own simulative

stupidity is the true object of humor. The central feature of humor, then, is self-parody rather than incongruity or ambiguity per se. The sine qua non of humor is the clash between the author and the implicit narrator, or, in broader terms, “the intermediate implied author” (Salvatore Attardo) – the unspecified inferior Other. The text is humorous insofar as it is self-parodic, that is, aimed against this implied figure.

This unnoticed dual authorship, linking humor with parody, suggests that the so-called “semantics of humor,” invariably regarded as the relationship between the humorous text and reality (or fantasy) must be viewed in an entirely different light because parody can be understood only from the metalevel, not from the narration level. Its referent is not reality, whether actual or imaginary, but solely an actual or imaginary text representing reality in a preposterous way. Failure of signification (as in parody), not the ostensible signified, is the reason humor is enjoyed. To be valid, a theory of humor must be metasemantic and metacognitive rather than merely semantic and cognitive.

In diachronic terms, the subject’s regression may be both ontogenetic and phylogenetic. The *sanity/folly* opposition inherent in humor is neutralized on the metalevel, as are all other oppositions on which culture is based. In archaic festive rites of renewal, this is matched by the *culture/nature* (*cosmos/chaos*) opposition. “Imitating inferior people” (Aristotle) and viewing this imitation from the metalevel is the key feature underlying the *serious/nonserious* opposition. This distinction links humorous laughter to its ritual counterpart.

Humor is subjective dialectic, playful self-repudiation, the subject’s parodic reflection on his own worldview regarded dynamically, from various developmental levels – not only top down, but also bottom up (cf. Aristophanes pretending to be mocking Socrates). The basic contradiction inherent in humor is purely subjective. It consists in the impossibility of reconciling the two viewpoints corresponding to two stages in the subject’s mental (intellectual, moral, aesthetic, etc.) development. Therefore the total subjectivity of humor does not contradict its enormous unifying force because both the subject and the object of humor is *Homo sapiens* – a dual biocultural being which in some sense remains the same despite undergoing ontogenetic and evolutionary changes, both biological and cultural.

Chapter 2, based on a vast body of biological data, is a farewell to subjectivity. Here, the reflecting subject is regarded as part of objective reality. In fact, the subject himself turns out to be an object of ontogeny, evolution, and history. Ethological and neurophysiological facts pro-

vide a basis for reconstructing the phylogeny of laughter. Spontaneous laughter has evolved from a metacommunicative signal of nonseriousness of play attack. A homologous signal is used by various species of higher mammals (not only primates). The considerable evolutionary age of laughter is evidenced by the fact that its controlling mechanisms are localized in subcortical regions of the brain and are involuntary. By contrast, the role of the evolutionarily young frontal cortex is to inhibit spontaneous laughter.

Human laughter is incomparably more intense than the protolaughter of other primates. At the physiological level, this is due to the necessity of breaking through the cortical barrier, and at the behavioral level, to the fact that the meaning of human laughter has enormously expanded compared to that of primate protolaughter. Laughter has turned into a metacommunicative sign of the nonseriousness of “play-challenge” (James Sully) in the broadest sense, which includes playful violation of any cultural norms internalized by the subject. Whereas theories proceeding from what appears to be the meaning of the humorous text have traditionally viewed laughter as a trivial physiological reaction to humor, the metasemantic theory reveals a deeper connection between the two phenomena. Both are manifestations of playful self-repudiation, inward and outward. Humor is pretended self-repudiation at the personality level (metarelation disabling the relation), whereas laughter signals self-repudiation at the interpersonal level (metamessage canceling the message).

The contagiousness of laughter creates an illusion that funniness is at least partly rooted in the object. Discussing the “semantics of humor” while viewing laughter as a mere physiological reaction is a double mistake. The first reason for this mistake is the professionalization of humor; the second reason, our belief that verbal communication is more reliable than are nonverbal unconscious metacommunicative signs. Actually, the situation is the reverse: humor is meaningless, whereas laughter is meaningful. A nonserious message only pretends to be using signs, whereas the metamessage (laughter) has a distinct meaning: “These are not signs!”

In chapter 3, two types of play are addressed: orderly play and disorderly play (*ludus* and *paidia*, resp., according to Roger Caillois). These are two distinct, in fact opposed, phenomena, differing in both origin and function. Orderly play (serious play, or role play in the broad sense) is synonymous with culture. This play is unique to humans, and is an attribute of man’s “artificialness.” It has no biological roots. Disorderly

play (nonserious play), by contrast, is rooted in the social (quasi-aggressive) play of primates. However, unlike its evolutionary precursor, human nonserious play is usually a metaplay – a reflection on culture and cultural roles (not always, though; children’s rough-and-tumble play is very close to primate play). Metaplay includes phenomena such as archaic festive rites reviving the world by temporarily abolishing all meanings; trickster myths; and humor.

The prerequisite of both types of play is the play frame (Gregory Bateson). However, while the frame encompassing orderly play is penetrable (therefore serious play is based on true signs), the frame enclosing disorderly play is hermetic. Signs which fall within it cease to be signs. The meaning of the frame used in nonserious play is this: “Whatever we are doing and saying now is wrong, but don’t take it seriously!”

In addition to the six functions of language described by Roman Jakobson, one more function, which has hitherto remained unnoticed, is described: the anti-referential function. Like the poetic function, it is message-oriented, but unlike the former, it undermines reference rather than enriching it. The anti-referential function, which manifests itself in all nonserious texts, from trickster myths to modern jokes, demonstrates that man can regard language in the broad sense (i.e., not as a specific code, as in metalingual function, but as a human capacity – the ability to use codes) from the metalevel. Despite being ostensibly based on language, the anti-referential function is in effect aimed against language. This function is opposed to all other functions of language because it uses its own physiological mechanism (laughter), which not only differs neurologically from the speech-generating mechanism, but inhibits it as well. In terms of Saussure’s *langue/parole* dichotomy, laughter is as disruptive to speech as humor is subversive to language.

Laughter is a metacommunicative sign aimed against verbal signs – an “anti-sign” (a term introduced by Marina Borodenko). Laughter destroys the signs used in symbolic communication not merely psychologically, but physically (physiologically) as well, being incompatible with speech and culturally guided action. The appearance of a new function (inhibition of speech) in addition to the older one (metamessage of nonseriousness) evidently accounts for the enormous intensity of human laughter, which sharply contrasts with the nonseriousness of its contexts and opposes it to primate protolaughter. The anti-symbolic meaning of laughter has apparently been the principal one ever since the emergence of language, all other meanings being secondary.

It is further demonstrated that merging the two types of language play, humor and irony, as theorists have traditionally tended to do, is erroneous. Irony is a variety of orderly play. Like serious fantasy and the lie, irony is based on true signs. It shifts the modality of the utterance without affecting either reference or proposition. Humor, by contrast, falls within disorderly play. It undermines reference, rendering the proposition invalid, and the modality irrelevant. Viewed from the metalevel, the essence of humor is the abolishment of communication based on symbols, either verbal or otherwise.

Apparently, the most fundamental conflict underlying humor and laughter concerns neither individuals nor groups, but the species *Homo sapiens* – the contradictory outcome of biological and cultural evolution. To all appearances, the emergence of language was a revolutionary rather than an evolutionary event. As the neurophysiological data suggest, language does not harmonize with the presymbolic cognitive and communicative predispositions that man shares with other primates (Terrence Deacon). Man – the speaking primate – occasionally raises a playful riot against the radically new symbolic communication. The riot manifests itself both in humor (at the language level), and in laughter (at the speech level).

The primary cause of laughter is the human condition as such. Convulsing our body, laughter liberates us not merely from words, but also from thoughts and feelings, bringing us into a state of “sweet madness” (William Fry) and rendering us inactive, thus offering a brief and salutary relief from the burden man has imposed on himself in the course of biological and cultural evolution. For a short while, Nature turns the tables on Culture.

Chapter 4 explores the transformations undergone by the original semantics of laughter in the cultural context. In the course of brain evolution, on account of the progressive subjugation of subcortical presymbolic functions by the younger neocortical ones related to language, the initial meaning of laughter has been repressed and, compared to motivations repressed in the course of individual development, has become even more unconscious (for that reason, psychoanalysis has proved of little help for studying humor). However, the attempts of language to turn laughter into a conventional sign have been unsuccessful because conventional signs (symbols) must be subject to voluntary control, whereas spontaneous laughter is involuntary. Having originated among man’s remote ancestors as a metacommunicative “anti-sign,” it has basically remained itself; in fact, it lives its own life, is hard to interpret,

and is antagonistic to speech. Rather than bringing man back to nature, laughter reminds him of the “artificialness” of his cultural status.

Because laughter is deeply unconscious, involuntary, and opaque, culture attempts to substitute the original meaning of this signal of friendliness for various fictitious meanings. However, emotions, inborn behavioral patterns previously termed “instincts,” and involuntary facial expressions are evolutionarily conservative. None of them has been transformed by culture beyond recognition. Opaque as it is, laughter is no exception. Owing to the expansion of its role and to the acquisition of an evolutionarily young anti-symbolic function, laughter has become incomparably more intense than the proto-laughter of apes, but has not turned into something qualitatively different.

Perhaps the most common delusion about laughter is the belief that it is intrinsically related to evil, aggression, condemnation, and hostility. The idea, which is deeply rooted in the lay mind, underlies the superiority theory of laughter.

Laughter, indeed, was part of cruel rites (most conspicuously, those where the mock ruler was ridiculed and killed); however, nothing indicates that these rites reflect the nature of laughter. On the contrary, the comparison of the most archaic festive rites (specifically those practiced by the Australian aborigines) with the play behavior of higher primates demonstrates a marked continuity, extending to features such as peacefulness, the unlikelihood of confusing mock aggression with true aggression, temporal abolishment or reversal of social hierarchy, and laughter. Evidently, the transformation of playful aggression into real aggression – a phenomenon which is unusual in the animal world – took place relatively late in human evolution. Proceeding from Bakhtin’s term, I described this phenomenon as decarnivalization. Estimates based on Australian data show that it occurred only during the last quarter of the evolutionary history of *Homo sapiens*, probably only during the last tenth of that time span.

One of the most striking phenomena related to decarnivalization is satire. Its various aspects are discussed in each chapter, and, as a result, satire is shown to be inherently contradictory. The satirist attempts to combine things that can only be alternated: the serious attitude to the object and the humorous metarelation undermining this attitude. He wishes to attack evil, but the means he tries to use for that purpose – the unconscious play signal of friendliness – renders the task infeasible. At the conscious level, the satirist is convinced that he is attacking the object with good reason; however, his unconscious laughter signals that

he deems his attack wrong and asks his partners not to take it seriously. Satire is a typical example of “double bind” (Gregory Bateson), where the unconscious metamessage contradicts the conscious message. In fact, the satirist combats not so much evil as himself, which eventually leads to mental crisis.

Laughter is a mirror for *Homo sapiens*, not a weapon humans can use against one another. The alleged counterexamples such as the Muhammad cartoons affair demonstrate that hostility can silence laughter, but not that they can be allies. If, however, laughter silences hostility, it unites people by making them sense their membership of a single species.

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